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# **New Farmers, Multiple Modernities and Alternative Social Worlds in Shanghai**

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## **Abstract**

In the face of rampant food safety scandals and environmental pollution affecting the Chinese food supply, a new breed of farmer has appeared in China: Middle-class farmers who gave up white collar jobs in the city to return to peri-urban farmland to grow produce without using synthetic fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides and without organic certification. The farmers' produce has potential to be both a lucrative solution to the problem of food safety and also a means to build an alternative future for the farmers themselves and those who share their passion for their produce. Through participant-observing the way these farmers sell their produce, I shed light on the farmers' views on consumers, the strategies that they use to attract potential customers and who they choose to collaborate with to sell their produce and why. I show how these farmers are seeking to create a social world with their customers that is an alternative to the consumerist society based on instrumental and utilitarian relations that much of middle-class China inhabits. The farmers' goals are reflected in their judgments of potential customers, and the challenges that they face when they engage with different collaborators from activists to businessmen and marketing and public relations executives in order to sell produce. The different practices of the farmers compared to their collaborators in selling their produce are indicative of different views of modernity - either as an alternative to consumerism, a continuation of conventional capitalistic modernity or a combination of both. The farmers' navigation of different visions of modernity and their aspirations to build an alternative social world shows that growing and then selling ecological produce is an ongoing challenge of negotiation between often contradicting beliefs about Chinese society and China's path of modernity.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

In the face of rampant food safety scandals and environmental pollution affecting the Chinese food supply, a new breed of farmers has appeared in China: middle-class farmers who gave up white collar jobs in the city to return to peri-urban farmland to grow produce without using synthetic fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides. The produce they grow is known as ecological (*shengtai*) produce, as the farms do not have organic certification. In this thesis, I show how the decisions the ecological farmers made beyond choosing to grow food without synthetic inputs were indicative of the tension between different worldviews in China. I argue that the farmers straddle the line between an alternative ecologically driven modernity and conventional, market driven, individualistic modernity in China. The farmers seek to create an alternative social world built on mutual appreciation and respect with consumers as an alternative to the utilitarian, transactional relationship between consumers and producers in China, a relationship that is based on genuine regard rather than mutual obligation between people in China. However, not all consumers were welcomed into this world, as I shed light on their perceptions of consumers, their collaborations with different actors from former environmental activists turned food activists to marketing managers at shopping malls.

As Goodman et al (2012: 9) point out:

*“Alterity and its politics can be found as ecological sustainability,  
new spatialities, social justice, personalized exchange relations,  
hybrid market-and non-market mutual forms of social organization,*

*and different modes of social organization, and different modes of governance. These innovations in production practices, social organization, and consumption routines challenge those established by productivist commodity agriculture and corporate food processors and retailers”.*

In this thesis, I show how ecological farmers in Shanghai are not only challenging productivist agriculture and the resulting food safety scares with their farming methods, but also conventional notions of modernity through their life choices, and social relations surrounding food in urban China by creating alternative social worlds through the marketing of their produce. In the course of marketing their produce the farmers encounter the challenges of consumer prejudices and the expectations and different goals of collaborators including marketers and food activists.

Ethical consumption reflects concerns about society and economy (Carrier and Luetchford, 2010). Tamas Dombos notes in his study of the motives for ethical consumption that lack of trust in industrial, capitalistic modes of production has been a factor leading Hungarians to choose ethical consumption (2010: 136). Ethical consumption is also a signal of protest against a corrupted food system, as Giovanni Orlando illustrates in his study of organic food consumption in Palermo (2010: 151). These institutional symptoms are also evident in China, as food scandals such as the Melamine scandal of 2008 have continually eroded public trust in the food system. Tansey and Worsley (1995: 1) “define the food system as how food is produced, reaches our mouths and why we eat what we do”. Indeed, the farmers started growing their own food as ethical consumers themselves, with the goal growing safe food for their families. In this thesis, I show that their endeavour goes beyond mere food production to changing the nature of social relations surrounding food, from one

of commodity exchange between buyer and seller to a direct relationship of appreciation between producer and consumer.

For the ecological farmers, marketing their produce entails making choices about whom to target as customers and whom to work with in the distribution of their produce. These decisions reflect the dilemma that the farmers face between adhering to conventional modernity and pursuing an alternative. The practices of the farmers and those that they work with show different views of development of Chinese society - either operating as an alternative to the open market or continue purely on the open market, or straddling the two positions. After over three decades of reforms that has seen the freeing and opening up of China's markets, the last decade has seen a reckoning with regard to the cost of these reforms including issues of environmental pollution and food safety. The ecological farmers have emerged as a reaction to these problems.

Some of the farmers have visions for China's future that is an alternative unfettered free markets and consumerism, while others seek to change the system from within by maintaining a position that is closer to the status quo of consumption and economic growth. The farmers' goals are reflected in the farmers' perceptions of consumers and the dilemmas that they face when they engage with different collaborators from activists to commercial collaborators such as businessmen and marketers while finding a way to market their produce. I show how the ecological farmers, in their different ways, are seeking to build a social world with their customers that is an alternative to the consumerist society that much of the middle-class in China inhabits. I shed light on the views that farmers hold regarding consumers, and whom they choose to invite to become part of the social worlds that they are seeking to create.

The ecological farmers face a dilemma between their aspirations to build an alternative social world and staying true to their alternative visions of modernity while maintaining financial sustainability. The farmers often find that they have to work with collaborators who are committed to conventional ideas of modernity. With increasing concern among consumers over food safety, safe food has become financially lucrative and this profitability has attracted a range of different collaborators to work with the farmers including entrepreneurial investors, retail store owners, and public relations and advertising industry executives. Large corporations are moving into the market to produce and sell organic food in the face of consumer concerns over synthetic herbicides and pesticides. Sometimes this can lead to conventionalisation, as alternative foods become increasingly similar to conventionally grown food in terms of production and distribution. There has been extensive literature on the conventionalisation of organic food production changing its roots from alternative countercultural production by hippies in communes (Belasco, 2007) to conventional production with monocultures (Guthman, 2004; Lockie and Halpin, 2005). Other scholars have suggested that there is a hybrid approach straddling the line between the alternative and the conventional (Campbell and Liepins, 2001). In this thesis, I extend this debate to the day to day choices that ecological farmers face in marketing their produce, whether to collaborate with activists or work with more commercial interests such as business people or shopping malls. The power dynamics in processes such as “greenwashing” and “conventionalisation” may not only rest with large companies or commercial enterprises, but also with the farmers themselves, who can choose with whom they collaborate.

In their study of alternative food networks, Goodman et al (2012) straddle between the two often oppositional positions of increasing conventionalization of alternative food and the continual sprouting up of alternative food movements such as new farmers' markets. As I will show, the farmers are approached by collaborators with an array of different motives, and the collaborators that the farmers choose to work with reflect their contradicting motives. Like food activists the farmers are striving to gain control of food production, yet the farmers are also attracted to the financial benefits of working with commercially oriented actors who seek to conventionalise their produce, and place it on the shelf along with the multitude of food choices available in China. The different motives of the different farmers and their different methods of working with collaborators demonstrate that the farmers and their collaborators do not form a coherent movement or network. Rather, the farmers are constantly negotiating with, and sometimes abandoning, collaborators and forming compromises in an effort to sustain their farms economically and socially.

### **The Emergence of Ecological Farmers**

In the face of growing concerns about food safety many middle-class consumers in China, concerned by the multitude of food safety scandals, are seeking an exclusive, safe food supply by engaging in what Amy Hanser and Camille Li (2015) call gated consumption. Given the affluence of this group of consumers, alternatives to conventional food such as certified organic food have attracted investors including entrepreneurs and venture capitalists (Ma et al, 2013). These consumers are the primary target market of the ecological farmers. The ecological farmers faced competition including imported organic food and local certified organic food. At the

time of my fieldwork the market for non-certified organic foods was small compared to the conventional organic sector, as certified organic food was available in supermarkets across Shanghai including supermarket chains such as Carrefour, high end supermarkets such as Ole and specialty food retailers such as High Quality Supermarket (*Haikete*). For some gated consumers conventional organic may not be enough, as they were sceptical of the authenticity organic certification (Kanthor, 2011). This sentiment led many consumers to search for alternatives further away from the conventional food system presented by producers such as the ecological farmers.

The farmers' markets I studied included one off farmers' markets arranged by the estate management of gated communities who invited the farmers, weekly farmers' markets arranged by organisations such as Our Piece of Ground a non-profit group founded by a former environmental activist Old Yu<sup>1</sup>, and farmers' markets that the farmers arranged themselves. The markets were usually held in affluent neighbourhoods in Shanghai, as these were neighbourhoods with gated communities in which affluent, gated consumers lived. At its inception the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market was a collaboration between Old Yu and the venue, Big Horizon Plaza, a shopping complex in an affluent neighbourhood in the Pudong New District of Shanghai. This was different to farmers' markets in the UK and Australia, which were often in non-commercial public spaces such as primary school playgrounds, parks, plazas or car parks. The signs of a good location were places with stores selling safe food such as produce grown without pesticides or imported food. The farmers' markets were often close to shopping centres, foreign department stores such as

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<sup>1</sup> In Chinese culture Old *lao* is meant as a term of respect for one's elders, but also a greeting. I also use the term little *xiao* for people younger than me. Interlocutors who have English names were given English name, and the term teacher *laoshi* is also used for interlocutors who were referred to this way. The names of research informants and places have been altered to protect their privacy.



Japanese Department store Takashimaya or in places with like-minded people such as sustainable design fairs. Activists such as Old Yu would find venues for the farmers' market such as conferences on returning to the land. The farmers' markets usually consisted of foldable canopies, foldable tables and baskets for the farmers to display their produce. This equipment was provided by the organisers of the market. The Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market would also provide two table cloths, a brown table cloth and a green table cloth with the organisation logo in white letters (see Figure 1), while other markets did not provide table cloths. At indoor markets there would be no need for the canopies and they would be left in storage.



Figure 1. A busy day at the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market. The logo for the farmers' market has been obscured for anonymity. (Photograph by the author October, 2014)

During the course of my fieldwork I encountered nineteen farmers at the farmers' markets. The farms were all located in the outer parts of greater Shanghai (See Figure 2). Ten of the nineteen farms in Chongming County, an Island off Shanghai to the north and five were located in Qingpu in the West. Two free range chicken farms were located in Nanhui, with one farm specialising in Guinea Fowl

located in Songjiang in the West and another in the South in Pujiang. The farmers were mostly mixed farmers growing rice, along with some produce such as leafy green vegetables, legumes and some kept other livestock such as chickens, mallard and the occasional goat. Most of the farmers at the market sold eggs and rice with a selection of produce depending on the season such as tomatoes in summer. Green, leafy vegetables were rare in winter. There were also three free range chicken farmers, who mostly sold eggs. The farmers would drive to the farmers' markets with their freshly harvested produce, harvested in the morning along with ready packaged produce such as rice and dried tofu skins or salted duck eggs.

While the farmers at the farmers' markets would appear on the surface to be a movement, I argue otherwise. As I will show in Chapter Three, the farmers did not always present themselves in a united front, instead it was the activists who considered themselves part of a wider movements. The relationship between the farmers was sometimes friendly and sometimes not. Some of the farmers had quite strong competitive rivalries due to similar produce grown. They would criticise each other over their decisions to employ different farming practices, sometimes even in front of consumers at the farmers' markets in order to get a sale. However, some farmers would also talk about global conferences or workshops on subject such as permaculture, and their participation in such workshops in locations such as Thailand. Others would also mention that they learned from sources such as the *One Straw Revolution* by Japanese permaculture farming pioneer, Masanobu Fukuoka. Such discourses demonstrated a degree of solidarity that the ecological farmers I met in Shanghai felt they shared with like-minded farmers in other parts of the world, which was a marked contrast with the occasionally negative sentiments that they had toward each other.

In the two locations – Qingpu and Chongming, where most of the ecological farms were located, neighbouring farmers used synthetic inputs. In Qingpu there were also farmers in the same village who used synthetic inputs. As we shall see this caused some tensions between farmers and their neighbours. The farms all had hired farm workers, some local and some from elsewhere such as the home provinces of the farmers. Access to land was not a problem, as the farmers I encountered had all started farming when it was not as difficult to find land for farming. One farmer in Chongming remarked that finding a patch of land to farm had become increasingly difficult as more and more people wanted to farm in Chongming. However, this did not seem to lead to tension between farmers and local peasants. Many of the farmers would rent land and hire their landlords as labourers. While housing was easy to acquire in Qingpu, it was difficult to acquire in Chongming, as the majority of the local peasants, who were over fifty years old, wanted to leave their houses for their children who had migrated to the city.

The market for safe foods had been covered in mainstream media in China. One example was a report I heard on the radio when I was sitting in the back of a taxi in August 2014 during my pilot study. The report was about the availability of safe produce from Chongming County at most wet markets in Shanghai. There was little coverage of the ecological farmers as a group in mainstream local media, however.



Figure 2. Map of Shanghai with indicators – light coloured arrows for the location of farms with the size in proportion to the number of farmers from that part of Shanghai and the dark arrow for the location of farmers' market. (Source of Map: <https://www.chinatravel.com/shanghai-travel/maps/>, downloaded, April, 2016 Arrows added by the author.)

Individually, the farmers would receive coverage from local district media promoting their farms as places to visit. Individual farms and farmers were also covered by alternative food media such as the website [yogeev.com](http://yogeev.com), a pun on the Chinese word

for organic *youji* (pronounced yoh-gee). I seldom saw media members at the farmers' markets. In contrast, at the market I frequented every week when I was in London, I encountered London newspaper food critics Matthew Fort and Jay Rayner on separate occasions. The farmers and activist collaborators such as Old Yu, the founder of the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' market did not seem to be pushing their agenda with a large public relations campaign. When I asked him about media coverage, he sceptically replied that such coverage was usually bought or paid for by the market organisers. Instead of media coverage of the farmers as a group, they relied more on salons and workshops organised in conjunction with the farmers' markets to spread their message and share their ethos with interested consumers. Many farmers told me that their main reason for participating in the farmers' markets was to have a promotional platform to sell their produce whether it be purchases by consumers on the day or securing produce box subscribers. Given this objective, the location of the farmers' markets was very important and securing a good location for farmers' markets was very much depended on working relationships between the farmers', activists and venue managers. It is to this subject that I turn to next.

### **Collaboration and Friction: Working with Others across Differences**

The different motives of different actors in the project of selling the farmers' produce give rise to the sometimes awkward partnerships between collaborators. I use the term collaborator in this thesis, as collaborators in a project can have different goals as Anna Tsing (2005) points out. The main collaborators in this project are the farmers themselves, activists, and commercial actors including marketing executives and shopping centre managers. The activists were keen to form alternative food networks while commercial collaborators saw the farmers' produce as a lucrative

product from which they can make a profit. The farmers themselves, straddle the two positions. On one hand the farmers are growing food by using farming methods that are alternatives to conventional farming with the use of synthetic inputs, on the other hand they need to be sufficiently profitable to ensure their economic survival. These different motivations can lead to simmering tensions stoked by their different beliefs about the farmers' produce. I show that collaborators can also work together on a project such as a farmers' market and achieve outcomes that satisfy all the parties.

Critics of alternative food production suggest that the potential for profit in growing ecological produce means that its ideals can be corrupted by the free market. Indeed, Laura DeLind (1993) is highly critical of alternative food networks and argued that they are manifestations of the market economy. They cater mainly to distinguished clientele of higher social status with higher income, which excludes many people (DeLind 1993: 8). DeLind argues that many alternative food producers are driven by profit rather than social justice. I suggest that DeLind's dichotomy between profit hungry growers growing for the market and feeding the people is too simplistic (1993: 10). Unlike the farmers in DeLind's study not all ecological farmers look at the bottom line, nor are they particularly concerned about social justice. Many of the farmers I studied cared more about growing good food than financial success. DeLind (1993: 10) points out that purely instrumental commercial relations rupture communities, and many of the ecological farmers, even the most commercially oriented ones would agree with this position. The ecological farmers may not be trying to create a common good, but they are trying to create an alternative to China's consumerism while also profiting from it to varying degrees, as they still need to make enough money to survive. I show that the motivation to cultivate a niche in the open market comes not from the individual farmers alone, but

from other actors such as potential investors, business people and marketers seeking to collaborate with the farmers.

DeLind's argument is a precursor to the idea of conventionalisation of alternative food. Proponents of the conventionalisation hypothesis argue that as organic agriculture develops it becomes more and more like conventional agriculture by embracing large scale production and long distance supply chains. Buck et al argue that, "organic agriculture is beginning to resemble conventional agriculture" (1997: 15) as the sector becomes more financially lucrative and produces in larger quantities. Guthman (2003) shows that this is very much the case in California, where large producers and distributors have entered the market for salad mix. It is not only new entrants into the market that have made organic agriculture become more like mainstream agriculture in California, but pioneering small holders have also expanded and grown their farms into commercially successful businesses (Guthman, 2004: 61). Optimists maintain that organic agriculture can still be a genuine alternative to industrial, high input production rather than a capitulation to conventional agricultural practices. Campbell and Rosin argue that the framing of commercial organic agriculture as "compromised and subject to co-option and subsumption...negates organic's continued potential to enact a more sustainable agriculture" (2011: 352). The cases from the conventional debate are mainly focused on production. I take the perspective of the conventionalisation debate about the threat of alternative foods such as ecological food becoming more and more like conventional food and apply it beyond production to the marketing and selling of produce, as the farmers face the temptation to become an alternative in the marketplace as DeLind posits. Unlike other research on the alternative food movement in China (Scott et al, 2014) that suggests the threat of being subsumed by

the conventional food system is ever present, reducing alternative food movements and the actors in them to merely static victims, I argue that the farmers are actively choosing to work within the conventional food system. I show that the farmers are willing to operate within the confines of the conventional food system while also presenting an alternative to it.

Working with actors who have different motives in the project of selling ecological produce does not necessarily lead to the conventionalisation of alternative food producers such as the ecological farmers. I argue that the farmers pick and choose whom to work with and when. Anna Tsing's concept of collaboration allows us to examine the working relationship of the different actors in farmers' markets such as organiser activists and venue managers in a nuanced way that reflects the flexibility of the farmers as they navigate the different opportunities they are presented with in the market place. In her study of the rainforests of Indonesia, Tsing shows that different actors with different agendas such as villagers and nature lovers can get together for a greater project such as protecting the forests and approach the project from different positions of interest. While the villagers were motivated by the immediate tangible interests of protecting their homes and food sources, the nature lovers wished to protect the fauna and flora in the forests in the name of nature preservation, an altogether more altruistic aim. This is very much the case at the farmers' market organised by activists concerned about food safety and environmental pollution in a venue provided and operated by a profit driven property developer, selling produce from ecological farmers who are also motivated by food safety but not always concerned with environmental pollution or profitability. All the parties share a common goal of selling the ecological farmers' produce.



Tsing's concept of friction is useful for analysing the tensions that underlie collaborations. In her study of the encounters between different global actors around the issues of forest destruction and protection in Indonesia, Tsing (2005:4) uses the term friction to describe "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference". The idea of friction captured the differences in encounters between the farmers, farmers' market organising activists, farmers' market venue managers, as well as marketing executives in the course of selling the farmers' produce. These collaborators would at various times work together on projects such as farmers' markets and the relationships would also fall apart in the face of their differences. While activists seek to close economic relations, commercial collaborators operate from the perspective of the open market where there is alienation between producer and consumer. These frictions shape the endeavour of the farmers' market and the different ideas that different collaborators have about how ecological produce can become a solution for the issues of food safety in China. I argue that the farmers are at once drawn to the profitability of the open market while also seeking to close economic relations and form a genuine rapport based on mutual respect with their customers.

### **Straddling Multiple Modernities**

The idea of modernity is central to the endeavours of the ecological farmers and their collaborators. Modern food production is filled with risks such as food safety scandals that have given rise to the need for safe food. Different actors have different ideas for solutions to this problem. In this section I discuss the different views of modernity that the different collaborators have in the project of selling ecological food. While some actors prefer to adhere to conventional modernity, others seek to

find alternatives. I begin with a definition of modernity. The term modern is derived from the French word *moderne* meaning “just now”, which is itself derived from the Latin *modernus* signifying a rupture from the past “to distinguish an officially Christian present from a Roman, pagan past” (Williams, 1983 and Smart, 1990 cited in Kahn, 2001). Modernity is a rupture from preordained cultural authority as Weber points out (in Eisenstadt, 2000: 5). This rupture from the past can take on many forms. As Donald Donham (2002: 244) points out that modernity, as a noun, “suggests a way of thinking or a state of being, whether for individuals or societies”. Scholars such as Anthony Giddens (1990) emphasises the societal aspect of modernity. He defines modernity as a rupture from traditional community based social relations within a locale resulting from industrialisation. Once intimate local communal social relations are replaced by distant social relations. Giddens calls this phenomenon distantiation. One of the consequences of distantiation is the decline in accountability arising from communal social relations. Giddens (1990) and Ulrich Beck (1992) have pointed out problems that have accompanied the successes of modernity such as increased alienation and risks. Scholars of alternative foodways and ethical consumption (Carrier, 2010; Goodman et al, 2012; Luetchford and Pratt, 2014) have shown that there are many actors seeking to bridge this disconnection in the food system between food producers and consumers. Farmers’ markets are being created to bridge the disconnection between consumers and food producers. These actors make visible the invisible risks that Beck (1992) elucidates and shorten the time space distantiation that come with modernity.

Different ideas of what modernity is can arise from different notions of rupture from the past. In their research on Africa Comaroff and Comaroff (1996) point out that one can believe in or practice witchcraft and still be modern. The same

questions can be asked of modernity when it comes to the food system, as modern food production is filled with risks such as food safety scandals that are often products of the time space distantiation that have given rise to the need for safe food. The industrialisation that accompanied modernity has had some positive and negative results on the food supply chain. While greater efficiency has meant that food is cheaper and in more abundant supply, the emphasis on efficiency has also led to monocultures. These food production methods have become a source of risk with the increasing use of synthetic inputs, a problem that has given rise to ecological farming in China.

In his analysis of food safety in China, Yunxiang Yan (2012) draws on Beck and Giddens. Yan's thesis is in line with his studies of individualisation in China focussing on the rise of the individual and individual rights (Yan, 2009; Yan, 2010). For Yan, increasing individuality in China has heralded an era of increasing individual rights and aspirations in response to the suppression of the individual during the era of high communism. Yan points out that one negative consequence of this increased individuality is selfishness (Yan, 2009). Yan (2012) suggests that this selfishness has led to a disregard by food producers for the wellbeing of socially and physically distant consumers. In his work "Sons of the Soil" Xiao Tong Fei (1943) compares the social structure of the west where all people are in it together to the social structure in China where group control of the ego through kinship and other obligations was untied firstly during high communism, and later from state ideologies in the post Mao era. Drawing on this work Yan (2012) argues that there is no accountability toward strangers in the contemporary food system in China as he shows with his interview with a former maker of fake blood pudding. Yan's informant was unconcerned about harming customers with his product, as it was

being sold to strangers (Yan, 2012: 724). Likewise, peasants grow produce using conventional agricultural inputs, while reserving a patch without the use of synthetic inputs for themselves and those in their immediate social circle. Yan's solution for food safety is to call for greater reliance on institutions given both the increasing social disconnection between people and the increasing need to deal with strangers that arises from modernisation. He focuses on a singular path of development focussing on increasing individualisation with increasing distrust, and the individuals in society needing to rely on social trust in institutions such as legally binding contracts rather than interpersonal trust to overcome lack of accountability in the food system. Yan's analysis does not take into account actors such as the ecological farmers and activists who seek to foster interpersonal trust by connecting consumers to farmers, focussing instead on the creation of functional institutions that facilitate the transition towards a transactional society. In this thesis I show that there are those in China such as the ecological farmers and their activist collaborators, who critique this very disconnection and are actively combating it by reconnecting food producers with consumers who are distanced from them in Chinese cities such as Shanghai.

Different collaborators at the market have different imaginations about a modern China. Does organic agriculture or the use of synthetic inputs represent modernity? Are interpersonal relationships between consumer and producer a sign of the past or is distanced relationship between consumer and producer a sign of the past? Different collaborators have different ideas for solutions to this problem. Some prefer to adhere to conventional modernity, while others seek to find alternatives. While distanced relations are a sign of convenience and progress to commercial collaborators, environmental collaborators see such relations as part of a past that should be left behind.

Scholars of modernity suggest that conventional modernity emanates from the West (Giddens, 1990) and more specifically the North Atlantic (Mitchell, 2000), as industrialisation, scientific advancement and rationality brought about a rupture from religiosity. The contestation of notions of conventional modernity have long been a part of anthropology. Many scholars have warned that North Atlantic modernity is not necessarily a universal absolute. Commaroff and Commaroff (1996) write, “There are in short, many modernities...cultures of industrial capitalism have never existed in the singular, either in Europe or in their myriad transformations across the face of the earth”. Aihwa Ong (1996) notes the particularities of different societies means that modernity is not just a matter of attempts to implement North Atlantic modernity in Asia. Instead she proposes the alternative of Asian modernities as an alternative to North Atlantic modernity. However, as Jonathan Friedman (2002: 293) points out, "Alternative modernities assume variations on some invariant theme or set of themes". Different views of modernity can also be based on different themes with regard to the end goal. I suggest that the different collaborators at the farmers’ market approach modernity from different perspectives assuming different themes and priorities. Rather than alternative ways to reach the same vision of modernity in China, different collaborators have different visions for a modern China. As Schmucl Eisenstadt (2000) points out, new visions of modernity deviating from modernity based on the vision of the state – be it capitalist or communist, are being developed on movements motivated by issues such as environmental protection or gender equality (Eisenstadt, 2000: 17). While Eisenstadt operates at the scale of the nation-state and macro political economy, his idea of multiple modernities resonates at the level of the different actors in the farmers’ markets in Shanghai that I studied. I argue

that the farmers straddle between the different visions of modernity held by the different collaborators that they work with to sell their produce.

Modernity requires a reference point outside of itself, or something to have ruptured from (Touillot, 2002). Conventional modernity is associated with reason and rationality, which Commaroff and Commaroff (1996) point out is the opposite of traditions such as ritual that are perceived by adherents to conventional modernity as backward. As I will show a similar critique of backwardness is often made by adherents of conventional modernity regarding the farmers' methods and the lack of facilities on farms. In terms of conventional modernity, the rural is backward compared to the urban's modernity as James Ferguson (1999) notes in his study of the Zambian Copperbelt. The distinction between the non-modern rural and the modern urban is very much evident in China as Yan Hairong (2008) has shown in her work on domestic helpers from rural China who move to Beijing. Indeed, modernity has its haves and have nots. In the eyes of those who see themselves as modern, those who are not modern are viewed as inferior. Thus, there is a fear of being left behind in the movement toward the future that constitutes modernity. Those who are not viewed as modern are labelled backward, which is a stigma. They are identified by others as being behind the times and in need to be taught how to be modern. While tradition is viewed as backward by conventional modernity, I suggest that it can also serve as a critique of conventional modernity, and can even co-exist with conventional modernity, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1996) show with the existence of traditional ritual alongside the trappings of North Atlantic modernity in Africa. They suggest that such rituals serve to be a way for people to deal with the negative consequences of modernity in Africa. Similarly, the farming practices of some of the farmers can be viewed as a response to the

consequences of modernity on the food system such as issues of food safety. In the eyes of collaborators in favour of other forms of modernity, the conventionally modern is the past and ecological alternatives should be the future.

Since its initial encounter with modernity in the colonial era in the 19th Century, China has been in search of modernity from enlightenment influenced models influenced by foreign experiences chiefly from Europe, to nationalistic models questioning European influenced models and also models combining local and global influences (He, 2002). The humiliation at the hands of the colonial powers made China feel its backwardness and question its place in the world. Where once they prided themselves as people of the middle kingdom and outsiders as crude barbarians, the technological superiority of the west dented this confidence and many felt that China was inferior to the western world. In China the re-emergence of North Atlantic modernity after the passing of Mao Zedong also heralded a rupture from a closed, planned, communist economy to an increasingly open, more market oriented economy under Deng Xiaoping when the opening up reforms started in the 1980s. China opened its border and foreign ideas started diffusing into Chinese society creating new desires (See Rofel, 1999). These desires created new imaginations of progress and lifestyles among the population (Appardurai, 1996).

The idea of being backward and left behind in the face of these changes continues to this day with the discourse of *suzhi* – human qualities, and the making of correct, modern person in China today (Anagnost, 2004 ; Kipnis 2007; Yan, 2008). For someone to be regarded as not having *suzhi* means that they do not have the right human qualities expected of a contemporary Chinese person. Chinese middle-class consumers who display urbane qualities such as conspicuous consumption of goods including the latest mobile phone, foreign brands of motor vehicles and cosmopolitan

consumption embody modernity and not being left behind by the process of modernisation. As I discuss in Chapter Four these qualities are evident in aspirational consumption as an expression of identity in Shanghai. The prevailing view of modernity shapes the idea of what constitutes an appropriately modern human being. People who do not exhibit qualities such as an understanding of urban aesthetics are regarded as inferior by those who do. In her study of domestic helpers from Anhui in Beijing, Hairong Yan (2008) chronicles the effect of urban migration and the subsequent experiences of modernity on the domestic helpers, who were from rural parts of Anhui province. The urban employers would often educate the helpers on the qualities that make a modern citizen in China, considering the helpers' behaviours to be backward and lacking in *suzhi*. In the eyes of urbanites such as the employers, rural people need to learn the appropriate traits and qualities to become modern citizens in contemporary China. As I will show many of the farmers already had these traits, as they were either once urbanites or continue to spend time in the city and participate in urban consumption. I shed light on how the farmers straddle the line between conventional North Atlantic modernity and alternative forms of modernity proposed by movement motivated actors such as environmental activist organisers.

The frictions in selling ecological produce are indicative of the tensions between different visions of modernity held by the different collaborators who work with the farmers to sell their produce. As I will show some collaborators adhere to conventional, North Atlantic modernity, while other collaborators seek an alternative motivated by environmental protection. Even though the farmers' reasons for farming are based on their concerns about the negative consequences of conventional modernity, sometimes they also adhere to conventional modernity for economic



reasons. Eisenstadt's idea of multiple modernities appropriately describes the farmers' varying degrees of willingness to adhere to the two different forms of modernity proposed by different collaborators with different motives, and the tension between these two visions of modernity in the project of selling ecological produce. Where the farmers are proposing an alternative is in their relationship with their customers, and it is to this point that I turn to next.

### **Alternative Social Worlds and Distinction**

The contemporary food system does not merely consist of individuals disembedded from old relations of interpersonal trust as a result of the processes of modernity, whereby producers are physically and socially distanced from consumers.

Alternative food networks and movements seek to bridge this distance and reconnect consumers to producers. In this thesis, I elucidate the way the ecological farmers in Shanghai seek to build connections with their customers that go beyond institutions such as contracts that enforce rules of mutual obligation in a transaction. The farmers' aspire to build a social world that is very different to conventional social worlds in China that are either built on the utilitarianism of a market exchange or mutual obligation of social relations. Instead, the farmers aimed to build relationships of mutual appreciation with their customers.

The ecological farmers seek to form new collectives, which bring individuals together in communities of interest surrounding ecological produce. The farmers are aiming to re-embed social relations by bringing consumers into their world through a shared ethos regarding how food is produced (Kjaernes et al, 2013). The goal of the farmers when they sell their produce is often more than just to make a profit from a transaction, rather they are seeking to create a long term relationship with potential

customers, who share their worldview. Jukka Gronow (2004) discusses the role of social worlds in sharing common tastes for certain qualities of food. In this thesis, I argue that the farmers are creating a social world around shared beliefs about the superior qualities of their produce in comparison to conventionally grown produce. The farmers' goal is to build a relationship of care between themselves and their customers that goes beyond the reciprocal relationship of exchange that occurs in the market place where the customer pays a certain amount of money in exchange for food. They are trying to create a social world distinct from the aspirational consumption driven world that has come to represent modernity in the eyes of many Chinese people.

As Jukka Gronow (2004) points out, standards of quality are often a product of the social worlds in which people belong. I suggest that the ecological farmers are trying to create a social world in which consumers with the means are willing to spend money on ecological food, as they feel that the produce has the qualities of safety and healthfulness. These consumers are people who are willing and able to pay more for food that is grown without the use of synthetic inputs, which are more expensive due to the higher cost. This appreciation for the qualities of ecological food is reciprocated by farmers, who show a genuine regard for the wellbeing of these customers and come to regard them as friends more than customers. The relationships that farmers want to have with their customers is not merely an instrumental relationship where regular customers receive a discount for their repeated patronage, but rather one of mutual respect between the farmer and their customer. The farmers are able to feel the customers' appreciation for their efforts to grow their produce, and the farmers respect customers for making the decision to spend money on their produce to look after themselves and their families.

The farmers seek to go beyond a transactional social world built on contracts and formally agreed obligations in a society where these conventional institutions are failing. The farmers not only seek to gain the trust of consumers in the face of constant food safety scandals, but aspire to form a relationship of mutual respect with their customers. In such instances of mutual respect, both sides care about each other beyond the economically utilitarian exchange of produce for money (Offer, 1997). The consumer knows how the food is produced and believes the farmers' claim, and the farmer is willing to accept the customer and enter into a relationship that goes beyond the customer-producer relationship of exchange of goods for money. Considered in this light, the farmers' sales rhetoric appealing to friendship can be interpreted as an attempt to draw people to become customers and then part of their social circle by creating a mutual sense of regard with the customer. In so doing, the farmers are re-embedding social relations into the trading of fresh produce, which has become a commodity relationship in cities such as Shanghai where consumers are distanced from the producers of the food they buy both physically and socially. According to proponents one of the main points of farmers' markets is to create a convivial environment where consumers can interact with the farmers who grew the produce that they are looking at or buying, and foster interpersonal trust between producer and consumer. However, personal trust is often underwritten by social obligations such as mutual loyalty between consumer and producer. Consumers may not want to be part of the farmers' social worlds that go beyond transactional interactions. Such obligations may be a disincentive to potential customers, who do not wish to enter long term reciprocal relations with the farmers for fear of becoming entangled in a long term relationship of reciprocal obligation. Traditionally Chinese social worlds have been based on relations of mutual obligation and reciprocity. The

farmers are seeking to go beyond the orthodoxy of reciprocity and instrumentality in Chinese social relations. As Mayfair Yang (1994) points out the bonds of kinship are often maintained through gift giving and sharing. For example, the Chinese belief in filial piety is built on the idea of mutual obligation with children being obligated to take care of their aging parents in return for their parents' care as they grew up (Stafford, 2000). In his study of gift giving in a Chinese village Yan points out that people would often be weary of entering into reciprocal gifting relationships based on indebtedness such as the going to banquets and having to give a gift to the host in return for the invite (Yan, 1996). Exchanging gifts, and also favours, as well as banqueting creates the mutual obligation and indebtedness that undergirds the personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence, known in Chinese society as *Guanxi*. Businesses rely on customers for their patronage to earn revenue and customers expect businesses to give them a good product or service in return. A loyal customer would usually expect to receive a discount or favourable treatment from a seller such as the farmers in exchange for their repeated patronage. The ecological farmers however, do not wish to be obligated to give the customers discounts in exchange for their repeated patronage, preferring a relationship built on mutual respect rather than instrumentality or mutual obligations with their loyal customers.

The farmers are not only seeking to develop a social world around those in their immediate circle, but inviting others in. Critics point out that this argument disregards the exclusivity of farmers' markets whereby people of certain social status, including people of lower social class, are excluded (DeLind, 1993). But, what if farmers are the ones who are selecting and rejecting consumers who wish to become part of the social world they are building? Furthermore, it is not a matter of the consumers lacking resources, but rather the farmers' rejection of the lifestyle of said

consumers, having once been members of the urban middle-class themselves. This was the case on the part of farmers, who passed judgements on potential customers, deeming them worthy or unworthy of becoming part of their social world.

Being part of a social world also gives rise to a sense of distinction among the farmers and their loyal customers. The sense of distinction is not so much built on class, but on moral superiority in that they are willing and able to spend money on ecological food and look after their families. Bourdieu in his study *Distinction* (1984: 57) points out that social life is a game where individuals participate and accumulate capital in order to elevate themselves in relation to others by creating a sense of distinction and therefore elevate their social position. Bourdieu argues that a person's taste in food, music and art served as a mark of one's social class distinguishing them from people of other social classes with different tastes. Here I take Bourdieu's idea of distinction and suggest that the farmers are creating a distinction between those in their social world and those outside of it based on their taste for ecological food that serves as a mark of their morality rather than social class. This moral distinction arises from buying ecological food rather than other goods such as the latest smartphone, and therefore choosing self-care and care for one's loved ones over conspicuous consumption. Morality becomes a form of cultural capital that the farmers and their loyal customers have attained, which they use to elevate their status in comparison to those who choose not to consume ecological food or those who are not as committed to consuming ecological produce.

The ecological farmers are not only trying to form social relationships with their loyal customers that go beyond the instrumentality of the transaction, but aspired to form relationships of regard based on mutual respect. The farmers seek customers who are not only able and willing to pay the higher prices for their

produce, but also appreciative of their efforts. In return, the farmers respect these customers who have made the choice to spend their money on their produce instead of on other consumer products and in doing have chosen to take care of their families in the best way possible. The goal for the farmers is mutual appreciation between themselves and their customers. The farmers appreciate the customers' care for what they eat and customers appreciate the efforts the farmers make to grow ecological produce.

## **Methodology**

This study was based on twelve months of fieldwork in Shanghai from September 2014 to September 2015 as well as occasional conversations on the social media platform WeChat after I left the field. The fieldwork in Shanghai was spent as a volunteer at the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market every Saturday and later once a month on Friday afternoons, on the ecological farms on Chongming Island and Qingpu, as well as accompanying the farmers on errands and deliveries. I also spent time trailing the founder and organiser of Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market, Old Yu, as he searched for sites for the market. I also interviewed and spent time with the management of shopping centres that offered sites to the Our Piece of Ground Market. Having started my fieldwork and met the farmers and the farmers' market organisers at the farmers' market, I continued to stay at the farmers' market as my primary field site. I found that the Farmers market was a space that revealed the frictions between the farmers and their different collaborators, as it was where these different parties – commercial actors, activists and the farmers gathered to collaborate on the project of selling the farmers' produce. As well as a site where the ecological farmers interacted with other actors, the farmers' market was also the field for contesting the different visions of modernity held by the different parties

involved in the market. At these farmers' markets, middle-class consumers buy produce from farmers, as they are concerned about the problems of modernity on the food system, while organisers such as shopping centre managers aim to maximise foot traffic to earn revenue for the shopping centres, and activists aspire to educate passers-by about the qualities of ecological produce and help the farmers.

As one of the major metropolitan centres in China, Shanghai is also one of the major markets for organic food with a body of middle-class consumers that are willing to spend money and pay the premium prices for organic food, which can be up to seven and a half times more expensive than conventional produce. The presence of supermarkets selling organic produce including organic supermarkets such as Mahota<sup>2</sup> alongside conventional retailers and a Slow Food<sup>3</sup> chapter is indicative of this. The presence of these distribution channels makes Shanghai an interesting site for exploring the distribution of ecological food.

I met the activist and main organiser of Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market, Old Yu, during a pilot study in August 2014 through a well-known and well connected Shanghainese artist whom I had met in 2008 when I was working in Suzhou. He took me to the farmers' market on a Saturday and it was there that I sat in on a meeting with Old Yu and a few volunteers. Because the market had already wound down by then, I only managed to meet one of the farmers, who ironically, had to leave the industry when his land was taken back by the local government. I only met most of the farmers when I began fieldwork proper in September. The locations of the markets, particularly on weekends when they were at shopping centres, struck me as odd given that several of these farmers were trying to steer their target customers away from their conventional lifestyle of modern, aspirational

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.themahota.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/SlowFoodShanghai/>

consumption. They were an alternative, but yet they operated at the heart of the beast. This contradiction makes the farmers' market the perfect place to capture the awkwardness of the connections between the different actors that gather in projects to sell the farmers' produce – namely, the farmers, activist-organisers and the commercial collaborators.

Data collection was based on taking field notes and recording dialogue on notepads, and then later with my mobile phone, when I was with informants on errands or at the market observing their interactions with others or having conversations with them. I tended to use my mobile phone during errands with farmers, as it was easier for me to take notes on my mobile phone than in my notebook while I was in their cars. The convenience of not needing to have a separate writing implement to take notes also made my mobile phone my preferred tool for taking field notes. However, at the markets I would use my notebook, as I found it easier to record tally marks in my notebook than on my mobile phone. I would also take occasional photographs on my mobile phone of situations such as busy and quiet times in the market or farm visitors in the fields, but not as many as I would have liked, as I was often busy helping the farmers as volunteer running errands at the market or during farm visits. I also collected textual data such as the pamphlets and leaflets that the farmers would distribute at farmers' markets. I used a clicker counter to count the passers-by at the market locations and record the final number in my field notes. I also manually counted and tallied the number of customers who would make purchases from stalls at the farmers' markets. From these two numbers I would formulate the ratio of patronage to passing traffic, what I call the conversion rate from passer-by to customer as a measure of success for the farmers' markets. After leaving the field in September 2015, I maintained contact



with my informants on the Chinese social media platform WeChat where we would chat as friends and new insights would arise from the conversations. I also briefly returned to Shanghai for a workshop and visited some of the farmers on that trip.

Participant-observing as a volunteer at the farmers' market, helping with all aspects from manning the stalls to setting up and packing up the canopies, tables and chairs allowed me to see the interactions between the farmers and the different actors that they collaborate with, including the activists organising the farmers' markets and the management at the venue. After setting up the stall and when I was not actively participating in manning the stalls I could wander through the markets and observe the interactions between the farmers, customers and potential customers. I would mainly stand behind the farmers in their stalls and watch how they interact with a customer. I would sometimes alternate my observational position at the market and stand on the other side of the counter to observe the interaction between farmers and customers. By alternating my position, I could also observe the reactions of passers-by to the farmers and their produce. At other times I would also wander around the markets and survey the area where passers-by could see the market, but were out of earshot of the farmers.

By volunteering at the farmers' market I was also able to become close to the organiser of the market and also the venue management. The actions of these different parties reflected the different views of modernity that the farmers, commercial actors and activists held. I was at all the post farmers' market briefings and meetings between the farmers' market organisers and venue managers. It is in the market where we can see the impact of food safety scares and the plethora of solutions available to consumers with the financial means to pay for them, and how consumers choose and reject these different solutions.

The farmers' markets, direct deliveries and farm visits are sites of interactions between the farmers and different collaborators including business people, venue managers, marketers such as public relations and advertising people, as well as loyal and potential customers. Accompanying the farmers on errands such as deliveries allowed me to observe the farmers' interactions with customers and ask for their opinions on customers straight after these interactions. It was during these errands that I got to know the farmers best, as we chatted about a variety of topics while we travelled. I also went to the farms to help the farmers when they had visitors, acting as an extra pair of hands to help them serve their customers. During farm visits I was able to observe the interactions between customers, the farmers and farm workers. Observing the interactions between the farmers and their visitors, and subsequently discussing the customers provided me with insights into the feelings that the farmers had toward their customers.

I rented an apartment in one of the suburbs in the west of Shanghai. It was through my city base that I found my key informant, Big Sister Wang, the older sister of one of the farmers. Big Sister Wang lived in the same apartment complex that I did. I had built a rapport with her younger sister, when I started field work in the market. From my first day at the market Sister Wang was not shy about asking me to help her take things from her van to the market. Through that I was then invited to her farm and accompanied her to help her entertain guests for farm visits. During these visits I would eat with the staff and try to build rapport, which did not work out as I had hoped due to their heavy accents that I could not understand. Many of the farmers were much easier to build rapport with than their labourers given their middle-class backgrounds, and lives in the city, which made their Chinese more comprehensible to me. I did not wish to get too involved with the guests, as I

preferred to observe their interaction covertly, as a volunteer-cum-researcher or doctoral researcher, *buoshi yanjiusheng*. At times I could not help but feel that this conferred some sort of cultural capital upon Sister Wang, which she enjoyed, as if to say, “My farm is special enough to warrant attention from a doctoral researcher”. When Sister Wang would point this out to her guests I would react sheepishly to the implication that I was something special.

I also stayed in a village in Qingpu, in a house that one of my informants rented from a lady in the village, over the autumn and winter during fieldwork and commuted back to the city for the farmers’ market. However, given my background as someone born in Hong Kong and speaking Cantonese at home, I found it difficult to establish a rapport with the local villagers since all of them had strong dialect affected accents that not even my house mate, an Inner Mongolian could understand. During this time I built a good rapport with this informant who allowed me to gain an understanding of the movement, as he was one of pioneers of ecological farming in Shanghai. However, I took the things he told me with a grain of salt, as he would all too often sing his own praises stating that he taught so and so all they knew about ecological farming. I also stayed at one of the farms in the village over the summer, by which point I had established a rapport with the owner and the farm manager. During my time at the village I took my meals at that farm, as I quite enjoyed the meals prepared by the farm owner’s mother. I felt emboldened to critique when they were considering price hike saying that they would be competing with other farmers who did not use bio pesticides when they did. My position was always to be as honest as possible with the farmers, as I would talk to friends whom I respected.

I was always upfront about my position as a researcher, handing out a name card by way of introduction to all my research informants. From the very beginning

of fieldwork, I made it clear to the farmers that I was not an expert in ecological farming, but rather there to learn from them, and I felt that many seemed to take me at my word. My background in the commercial world as an undergraduate business major and also my experience as a volunteer at Island East Farmers' market in Hong Kong allowed me access and rapport with some, but not all, of the farmers' commercial collaborators. My overseas background and experiences were particularly useful for building rapport with collaborators such as Andrew, the marketing manager of Big Horizon Plaza, who as we will see in Chapter Four, had a cosmopolitan outlook. I was able to build a rapport with him, as he was keen to see what farmers' markets outside China looked like because he wanted to change the aesthetic of the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market. At times, I was able to empathise with the farmers' commercial collaborators or potential commercial collaborators through my own frustrations at some of the farmers' strategies or lack thereof.

I could empathise with all the collaborators at the market including the farmers, commercial collaborators and activist collaborators as I could see things from their different perspectives. My empathy stemmed from my high school and undergraduate education, which gave me a perspective that combined the ecological ethos of activist collaborators with a marketing oriented approach of commercial collaborators at the market. Having studied business as an undergraduate and then marketing as a postgraduate, I was also able to empathise with commercial collaborators, sometimes at the expense of seeing things from the farmers' perspective. Yet I was also inspired by the farmers' and also activist collaborators' aspirations for a more ecological aware vision of modernity, a critique that I shared based on my studies of environmental problems such as Climate Change and

pollution induced acid rain during high school. This awareness of the negative consequences of modernity was further focused on food when I began my postgraduate degree in food studies in 2008-09, as I learned about the flaws in the conventional food system.

I appreciated the importance of marketing and the need for the farmers to present themselves in a way that would appeal to target customers, and was surprised by the inability and also the unwillingness of certain farmers to conform to the demands of business collaborators, as many of the farmers used to be from a similar social class to their commercial collaborators. Sometimes my business-oriented perspective would lead to frustrations on my part, as I would admonish and argue with my informants when I was frustrated as to why they did not do things a certain way. I was surprised that the farmers were unable to code switch from environmentalism driven modernity to conventional modernity and back again. Some farmers seemed to be less able or willing to switch between their current identity of being ecological farmers and their former identities as members of the urban middle-class. Perhaps, it was easier for me, as a migrant to switch between identities as a Chinese person and then an Australian, as I had grown up in Australia with frequent trips to Hong Kong during my childhood.

However, despite my background I was unable to build a rapport with the advertising executive Karen, who masterminded the initial deal leading to the farmers' market to be staged at Big Horizon Plaza, as she was always busy. Fleeting into the market and fleeting out again just as I finished observing a transaction or taking the sweet potatoes, which had been boiled down to the market from the kitchenette provided by the row of four stalls. I would often hesitate as I did not agree with many of her strategies at the time, which I did not feel confident in

critiquing. Furthermore, I wanted to observe her strategies in action before I critiqued them. I only felt comfortable offering positive suggestions rather than critiques, which was a difference between my interactions with Karen and Andrew. Andrew asked me to show him something while Karen asked me for solutions, which I did not feel comfortable giving as a researcher.

I could empathise with Andrew's position as a company employee seeking to maximise their revenue and did not feel a need to confront him about his position. As a business graduate I was impressed by the ability of some commercial collaborators to articulate their vision for attracting middle-class customers through aesthetic displays, in comparison to some of the farmers who were dismissive. Perhaps I showed collaborators such as Andrew too much deference, as I too had once been part of a corporate hierarchy when I worked for a finance company in Sydney. Compared to commercial collaborators, I was much more direct in my conversations with Old Yu, the former activist-turned farmers' market organiser. At times I found his way of working frustrating. I wish he had been more of a charismatic leader, an aspiration that came from my beliefs about the importance of branding as a student of marketing. Another reason that I was less direct in my criticism of commercial collaborators was that I did not spend as much time with them as I did with the farmers and Old Yu. As a researcher, I found it easier to enter Old Yu's social world than that of busier commercial collaborators.

My Chinese ethnicity was neither a help nor hindrance, as to many of the farmers I was an extra pair of hands at the market when I first started showing up. This is unsurprising given that there would occasionally be different volunteers showing up to help with the Our Piece of Ground farmers' markets at different times of year. These volunteers included friends of Old Yu who worked with him at an

environmental NGO or friends of commercial collaborators. However, throughout my fieldwork, I was the most consistent presence at the farmers' markets. Eventually the most loyal of the farmers came to see me as a friend, with one greeting me with a hug when I went to visit them in April 2016.

I would transcribe the field notes from my phone to Microsoft OneNote usually on Sunday after Saturday market day and once or twice during the rest of the week at my apartment. The process of transcription would trigger memories from previous field note entries on one note, which would lead me to review those notes using the keyword search tool on Microsoft OneNote. I would compare these instances and it was through these comparisons that I began to identify recurring themes such as consumer scepticism toward the farmers. I looked at different research interlocutors' explanations for things I observed in the field such as the scepticism of passers-by. I would also find patterns in what I observed and heard by periodically reviewing my field notes for recurring themes such as common dialogues between the farmers and passers-by at the market. At times I would look for explanations and analysis among the farmers and other collaborators of such encounters in my field notes. About 4 months into fieldwork, which was around a third of the way in, I carried out a review of my field notes and put together a potential thesis outline based on the themes I found. It was in this review that I found it was necessary for me to discuss the issue of trust even though I had aimed to avoid it, as I thought it was a theme that is well covered in the literature. The review revealed that lack of trust in the farmers among passers-by was a constant theme in my field notes at the farmers' market every week. As a result, I decided to focus more closely on how the farmers aspired to build consumer trust for the remainder of fieldwork.

When writing up, I began by writing the most vivid moments of my ethnography from memory without consulting field notes based on moments such as certain farm visits or farmers' reactions to visitors that stood out in my memory based on my regular reviews of my field notes during field work. In order to build on these vignettes and form the chapters in this thesis, I would then turn to my field notes to check for similar moments or moments that could form a narrative about the experiences of the farmers such as their ability to conform to the aesthetic expectations of middle-class consumers. My strategy when consulting my field notes was to select moments that reveal the most about the tensions they were feeling or challenges and frustrations that the ecological farmers and their collaborators faced in selling ecological produce. The idea of tensions led me to Anna Tsing's (2005) idea of frictions and to points of contention between the collaborators at the farmers' market, which eventually led to the idea of collaborators having different views of modernity. The challenges in selling ecological produce led to the idea of alternative social worlds proposed by Jukka Gronow (2004), as I explored how the farmers explained and dealt with their frustrations in trying to sell their produce and what their ideal world without these frustrations would be.

### **Thesis Organisation**

In the next chapter, I turn my attention to the historical factors that have given rise to the ecological farmers. I outline the food system of China from ancient farming practices to the increasing use of agricultural inputs in contemporary period and locate the ecological farmers within this system. I start with the beginnings of farming in China and the schools of thought regarding the relationship between humans and nature that shaped the Chinese approach to agricultural production. I



discuss and shed light on the production of synthetic agricultural inputs as China modernised in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the increasing demand for these inputs in the face of population pressures and deterioration of soil quality. I chronicle the changes in the food distribution system in China that have given rise to concerns about toxic chemicals in foods in China and the state responses to this problem, and the issues of corruption in these solutions. I show how the rise of ecological farmers is one of the solutions to this problem.

In Chapter Three I outline the stories of several ecological farmers, their farms and farming practices. I shed light on the different ways that the farmers grow produce including their use of techniques such as polytunnels and how these different approaches reflect their views on contemporary farming practices. These different views affect the relationships that the farmers have with each other and also with neighbouring villagers and farm labourers. These differences also show that the farmers are not an alternative movement or network with a coordinated ideology. I argue that their different practices show that the farmers are not so much a coherent social movement with a coherent ideology, but rather individual entrepreneurs who occasionally have overlapping interests.

In Chapter Four I discuss the history of Shanghai, chronicling how the city became a contact zone of modernity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and republican eras and how it has risen to take up that mantle once more in contemporary China. I show how consumers' desires are reflected by Shanghai's position in China as the vanguard for modernity. I shed light on how Shanghai's reputation for pragmatic commerce has contributed to the dilemmas that the farmers face in selling their produce. I also discuss how the culture of the city's residents make it a space where

different collaborators are able to come together for an endeavour such as a farmers' market while undergirding the resulting friction between the different collaborators.

In Chapters Five through to Chapter Eight I turn my attention to the farmers' market, and the selling and promotion of ecological food. Given the recent food safety scandals in China, consumers and potential customers for the ecological farmers' produce are understandably sceptical of the farmers' claims about their produce being free of synthetic agricultural inputs when they first engage with the farmers. Chapter Five covers the tactics that farmers use to build rapport with the passers-by at the farmers' market. I shed light on the challenges associated with these tactics and how the etiquette of social relations in Chinese society make it difficult for farmers to create an alternative social world built on mutual appreciation. I argue that the strategies that the farmers use reflect the farmers' goal to create social worlds that are distinct from the instrumentalism of exchange or the obligation of social relations in Chinese society.

Consumers are not the only party passing judgement at the farmers' market. In Chapter Six I discuss the judgements that the farmers make on consumers. I show how the ecological farmers aspire to create an alternative social world based on mutual appreciation with the consumers of their produce. I shed light on how in the process of creating these social worlds the farmers are creating a sense of social distinction between those like them who are willing to commit to ecological food both financially and ethically and those who are not. In the eyes of the farmers, people who are willing to spend money on ecological produce are not only making a financial commitment by paying a higher price, but also making an ethical commitment to look after themselves and their families. The farmers contrast these customers to consumers, who choose not to spend their money on ecological produce.

Such consumers were criticised by the farmers for failing in their duty of care. I show how those who meet the farmers' criteria become part of their social world and gain the highest moral distinction from farmers.

In chapters Seven and Eight I discuss the different ways that ecological farmers collaborate with different actors to sell their food, and the challenges and dilemmas that they face in choosing who to collaborate with. In Chapter Seven I show how the ecological farmers' produce is marketed by different collaborators as reflected in the aesthetic demands they placed on farmers at different farmers' markets. I discuss how the farmers work with collaborators including environmental activists, alternative food activists, advertisers, shopping centre managers and business people to reach affluent consumers who are willing to pay more for what they believe to be safer food. I show how these expectations from different collaborators reflect their different motives and perspectives that they have regarding the future of China. I also show how the growing expectations of middle-class consumers in China for aesthetically appealing displays and spaces of leisure that contribute to the eventual decision to buy ecological produce are dealt with in different ways by the farmers and their collaborators. These different expectations reflect the different perspectives of these different parties about modernity.

In Chapter Eight, I present the case of the activist organiser, Old Yu, who works with the farmers to sell their produce. While activists emphasize educating consumers about the negative environmental impact of conventional food production seeking a more ecological sustainable path of modernisation, business people and advertisers emphasize the potential profitability of ecological food reflecting their adherence to conventional modernity. These different paths give rise to the dilemma of whom to cooperate with to market their produce for ecological farmers. The

decisions that the farmers made reflect their straddling of multiple modernities as they often chose more economically lucrative opportunities to work with collaborators who adhere to conventional modernity rather than the alternative ecological modernity espoused by Old Yu that was more in line with their alternative farming practices.

In Chapter Nine I elucidate the contradictions of the ecological farmers. The farmers' positions of having one foot in conventional modernity based on consumerism and individualism, while having the other foot in alternative modernity based on closer social connections in the food system shows that they are neither purely altruistic or individualistic. Instead the farmers aspire to build a social world based on mutual appreciation rather than the instrumentalism of exchange relations or mutual obligation of traditional Chinese social relations. I suggest that this is exemplified by their relationship with collaborators such as Old Yu and their inability to form a unified movement. I conclude with a discussion of the broader implications and limitations of this study as well as further research.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Conventional Agriculture and its Consequences in China**

One day after the temporary farmers' market at an international urban design company, the farmers were asked to attend a special meeting at the offices of a sustainable design company that owned one of the farms that participated in the market. I had no idea about the purpose of the meeting. We arrived at the organisation to find the company boardroom filled up with various actors, some of whom I recognised from previous occasions where Old Yu, the organiser of the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market, had taken me to meet friends in civic society movements in Shanghai. The meeting began and the chair revealed the purpose of the meeting, which was to help Old Yu decide on his direction after the cessation of the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market at Big Horizon Plaza. When asked what his ultimate vision was, Old Yu said, "I suppose I just want all farmers to stop using synthetic agricultural chemicals (*nongyao*)."

The desire for all farmers to stop using synthetic inputs is the result of the contemporary food safety scandals that have roused consumer concerns (See Klein, 2013; Yan, 2012). These concerns are a reflection of the accumulated environmental problems with China's food production since ancient times. In this chapter I show how this came to be a goal of an activist in contemporary China by tracing back through the history of agriculture in China. I show that the problems with food safety in China derive from a combination of intensification rather than industrialisation of agriculture, and peoples' ideas about the relationship between man and nature in China. The intensive use of land to feed an ever increasing population and the belief that nature is an obstacle to be conquered incentivised the use of all possible inputs,

sometimes applied to excessive levels. I contextualise the food system that gave rise to the ecological farmers in China. Specifically, I chronicle how the excesses of the intensive conventional farming system in China since ancient times in the face of continuous population pressures combined with people's attitudes toward nature, and the food distribution system, have contributed to the food safety scandals and consequently to the rise of the ecological farmers. Given that this study is based on fieldwork in Shanghai at the mouth of Yangtze River, many of the examples in this chapter will be drawn from studies of agriculture in the Yangtze Delta.

I start with the history of food production in imperial China. I shed light on the traditional techniques that gave Chinese farming a reputation for sustainability in the eyes of outside observers, and also the increasing intensification of farming in the face of rapid population increases that would set the precedent for using whatever means necessary to boost production. I also show how these techniques were required due to population pressures. I discuss the schools of thought that gave rise to beliefs that humans were superior to nature and therefore had the right to harness nature to their needs.

Next I discuss the introduction of nitrogen fertilisers and pesticides, and the modernisation of agriculture in China during the republican era and high communist era under Mao Zedong. I elucidate the break with finely tuned past practices, albeit increasingly strained intensive agro ecological systems and the consequential ecological disasters and their impact on agricultural production during this time. I also show how the decision to attack nature during the high communist era contributed to ecological imbalances that lead to the need for increased use of synthetic inputs in farming. I then discuss the contemporary food supply chain in China. I shed light on the problems of social and spatial distance between food

producers and consumers in contemporary China that have led to problems of accountability between the two parties, and subsequent, food safety scandals. Lastly I discuss the responses that the state has implemented in response to these problems such as Chinese Ecological Agriculture (CEA) and organic certification schemes in China, and the critiques of the failures of these systems, which has led to public distrust of these foods. I show how the mentality of yield protection and maximisation along with the lack of accountability of socially and physically distant food producers to consumers contributes to many of the food scandals that have racked contemporary China.

### **Agricultural Production and Attitudes to Nature in Imperial China**

In this section I discuss the history of agriculture in China with the aim of showing how Chinese agriculture while ecological in many respects such as the use of techniques of intercropping and integrated farm systems, was also a factor in environmental degradation due to pressures to intensify production. The need to be efficient was a driving factor, as agricultural production struggled to keep up with booming population growth (Anderson, 2014). For example, from 1300 to 1800 China's population increased from 75-85 million to 400 million (Marks, 2012). In order to understand how China arrived at this point we must first chronicle the history of agriculture in China and the schools of thought that influenced approaches to farming in China.

Archaeological findings show that the Chinese began slash and burn farming in the New Stone Age (6000-8000 BC). Tillage farming was practiced later on the burned land, where the ash was mixed with the soil. This form of slash and burn agriculture would be practiced for 6000-7000 years until the Xia Dynasty (Li, 2001:

24). By 5000 BC rice had been domesticated in the Yangtze River delta. The essential form of Chinese farming with a peasant household intensively tilling a small plot of land took shape in the years of 1000 BC to 300 AD. The productivity of this model of farming was able to support a substantial population increase during this time from five million to sixty million people (Marks, 2012: 100-101). In the North of China they practiced loess-based millet farming. Both this and wet rice farming in the south proved to be successfully self-sustaining, as the land could be planted for years on end without the need for a fallow period. The result was an intensive system of cereal agriculture that could support large populations in villages.

The typical model was “peasant families farming small plots of land” (Marks, 2012: 33). In the south of China the most well-known farming system was a combination of aquaculture and mulberry trees. The Chinese philosopher Mencius praised the self-sufficient small hold farming writing, “If a family owns a certain piece of land with mulberry trees around its house for breeding silkworms, domesticated animals raised in its yard for meat, and crop fields cultivated and managed properly for cereals it will be prosperous and will not suffer from starvation”. Mencius also noted that timely harvesting of resources from nature such as trees from the forest and fish from waterways would ensure that there would be continued abundance (Li, 2001: 25). As Eugene Anderson (2014: 264) writes, “The result was the most incredibly productive ecosystem in the premodern world, yielding 2,500 pounds of rice per crop, 2-3crops per year and side benefits including fish, silk, vegetables and so on.” Pests were controlled biologically with well-known natural insect predators for insect pests as well as fish that would also fertilise the soil in the rice paddies. Other forms of insect pest control included ducks, frogs and the later maligned sparrows. Farmers in northern China used various digging



implements to dig out weeds, while in the wet-rice cultivating south they learned to weed with their hands by pushing weeds into the mud, where the weeds could act as green fertiliser. In the north weeding was such an onerous task that villagers grouped together to carry out the task collectively. In the south farmers had help from fish, a technique that could be traced back to the Warring States period from 475 BC to 221 BC (Marks, 2012: 136-137). In the case of households with pigs the weeds were fed to pigs (Anderson, 2014: 264).

Agricultural knowledge in China has long been chronicled in treatises such as the agricultural treatise *Qi Min Yao Shu* published in 544 AD written by northern Wei Dynasty official Jia Sixie. This knowledge includes the use of legumes for nitrogen fixing and a mixture of manures to enrich the soil, which Chinese farmers had been practicing for centuries before European farmers (King, 1911: 10).

Legumes were used to fix nitrogen as a domestic crop by 1000 BC (Marks, 2012: 32).

Records of multicomponent agriculture could be found in works published in subsequent eras such as *Chen Fu Nong Shu* (The Agricultural Treatise of Chen Fu) published in 1149. The treatise mainly covers the agricultural techniques used south of the Yangtze River such as intercropping and soil fertility preservation techniques.

“Another example is fishery in paddy fields. In *Ling Biao Lu Yi*, written during the Tang Dynasty, it was described that ““putting the eggs of grass carp into paddy fields, when fish grow up, the roots of weeds were eaten up and the field is fertilized.

Consequently the rice can yield a good harvest”” (Li, 2001: 30). *Qi Min Yao Shu* brings together the agricultural knowledge that had been accumulated in China up until its publication in the sixth century. It demonstrates a “deep understanding of the interrelationship between crops and their environment and implementation of the knowledge in agricultural practice” in China (Li, 2001: 27-28). The treatise had a

chapter on mulberry cultivation, which included the following description of intercropping mulberry with bean[s] and other crops:

*The seedlings of mulberry tree were first grown in a nursery 5 feet apart and then replanted 10 bu apart (approx. 7-8m). If beans and appropriate crops are cultivated between mulberry, the space can be fully utilized, while the fertility of the soil can be improved. However, intercropping mulberry with maize and sorghum or millet will be harmful to the soil. Radish can be grown within 60 centimetres of the trees. When the radish are harvested, pigs can be put into feed on the residues of the crops to loosen the soil. Jia Sixie affirmed the role of green manure in soil improvement, and suggested that the best way is to plough in mung beans, then lesser beans and sesame.*

The agriculture that has been practised in the Yangtze River Delta was built on intensification of cheap family labour, and later the intensification of chemical inputs such as nitrogen fertiliser. The intensification of labour was a key factor in Philip Huang's (1990) argument that agricultural development in the Yangtze River delta was mainly due to involution. Huang notes that the region has been growing high yielding crops from food crops such as rice to cash crops such as cotton, rape and mulberry trees for silk for centuries. The spread of cotton during the Ming dynasty drew women and children in households into agricultural labour (Huang, 1990: 53). Productivity in smallholder households was also increased by the utilisation of family labour to carry out a variety of tasks including handicrafts such as cotton spinning to supplement household income (Huang, 1990: 84-86).

Intensification of land occurred with the double cropping of rice during the Ming

Dynasty (Huang, 1990: 53). This model would continue into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as Fei Xiaotong showed in his study of peasant life in the village of Kaixian Gong in Jiangsu Province in 1935. Fei Xiaotong notes that the family household, the *jia*, is the main unit of production and consumption, as well as the main unit of landownership (Fei, 1943: 59). Children would also labour for the whole day in the fields once they were past the age of 10 to earn their keep. The “girls would learn to raise silk worms” (Huang, 1990: 87). Huang notes that peasants were not able to afford the output from their sericulture enterprises, with silk being reserved for elites. Thus, this system was one of extraction from the peasant household. Huang noted two types of extraction. Sometimes peasants would pay rent on their land with their crops, which would then be sold by the landlords. Sometimes peasants would sell their crops to pay rent and buy them back at higher prices (Huang, 1990: 102).

As well as intensification of land and labour, the third factor that Huang points to responsible for increasing productivity in the Yangtze River delta was the increased use of fertiliser, specifically soy bean cake fertiliser (1990: 88-89). Huang notes that this could have led to a feedback loop where increasing use of fertiliser may have been required to maintain yields with increased cropping during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1990: 90). Technologies such as fertiliser and new seeds came to the Yangtze delta through merchants, who charged very high prices for them, adding an extra financial burden on smallholder households. During the Qing dynasty and republican eras soy bean fertiliser would be applied after green fertiliser, which usually consisted of a mix of alfalfa, straw and waste from pigs (Huang, 1990: 130-132; Fei, 1943: 164). Labour intensive green fertilisers such as canal mud were also used. In his study of farming in East Asia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, F.H. King chronicled the process of collecting canal mud in Jiangsu, which required four male

labourers. He also noted that picked vines would be composted with the mud if further nitrogen was required (1911: 172). King noted that this method was used once every two years or less frequently when cheaper fertilisers could be found (1911: 176). Another labour intensive process that farmers in Jiangsu would carry out was exchanging soil between mulberry and rice fields to increase soil fertility (King, 1911: 178). Proponents of smallholder agriculture, which relies on traditional knowledge, such as F.H. King (1911) and Robert Netting (1993) argue that smallholder agriculture like the systems in China are more sustainable than those in the industrialised societies of the West. Netting notes that Chinese smallholders' "achievement of high agricultural production without deterioration of national resources for centuries compels attention and respect" (1993: 236). He argues that smallholders "have learned to understand nature, and renew the soil and water that sustains them" (1993: 334). But is this really the case in practice?

While farmers, understood the ideology inherent in Daoist and Confucian cosmology, sometimes material factors such as the need to recreate family would conflict with these ideals leading to the need for intensification (Weller, 2006: 28). Critics suggest that the idea of smallholders and indigenous peoples being custodians of the land is often an unrealistically romantic one. As Robert Weller notes in his study of environmentalism in China, even though Daoist cosmology suggests a harmony between humans and nature, there are also several other perspectives of relations between human beings and the environment that inform agricultural practices in China (Weller, 2006: 23). These schools of thought included Confucianism, legalism and neo Confucianism (Marks, 2012). Following these schools of thought did not result in the conscious establishment of environmentally sound practices largely because human utility always received first consideration

(Weller and Boyler, 1998: 473). Marks points out “The ancient Chinese were less interested in ‘living in harmony with nature’ than they were in humanising it” (Marks, 2012: 67). The humanising of nature was influenced by several schools of thought such as Confucianism and legalism.

Daoists believed that people should do what is natural, following “the Way”. “Following one’s own nature, like water flowing downhill, would be the way to simplicity and harmony” (Marks, 2012: 94). Daoists were sceptical about the benefits of civilisation if it meant separating human nature from and dominating of the natural world as Confucianism suggested. “Daoists contrasted ‘the developed world of civilization’ with the ‘idea of unity with nature’ and blamed civilization (and Confucianism) for destroying the harmony between man and nature” (Marks, 2012: 95). Confucians on the other hand believed that human beings formed societies, as “alone human beings would succumb to wild beasts. Man thus... ‘tames wild animals and brings cowed vermin under his control.’” The result is a society that reflects the nature of man (Marks, 2012: 94). Mencius (379-289 BC), one of the successors of Confucius, believed that humans were above nature. However, he also pointed out the importance of moderating consumption of natural resources so as not exhaust them. Xunzi (312-230 BC) “celebrates the regulating, active role of man with regard to nature.... ‘domesticating of nature confers upon it a new order tailored to many and reaching human perfection in terms of human needs’” (Marks, 2012: 95-96). Legalists believed that the people as well as nature should be controlled by the state. As the seventh century BC statesman Guan Zhong writes in his work *Guanzi*, “One controls the people as one controls a flood. One feeds them as one feeds domestic animals. One uses them as one uses plants and trees” (Marks, 2012: 96). The Qin emperors (221 BC to 206BC) instituted a director of farm works under the ministry

of agriculture, who “helped farmers with the timing of planting, and with the proper techniques of cultivating the various crops”. Forest wardens working under the ministry of agriculture enforced rules on fires “so respect is shown to the hills, wetlands, forests, and thick vegetation”, as they were important sources of materials. The director of works managed irrigation and drainage, and the water supply (Marks, 2012: 96-97).

Weller (2006: 28) points out that while agriculture requires an understanding of ecological processes, it also requires humans to alter the natural environment, noting that rice paddies are a man-made construct. Deforestation by peasants to clear land for farming, even though it was unsuitable for rice agriculture was indicative of how practices deviated from the idea of harmony between humans and nature, and resulted in flooding and soil erosion. The disappearance of animals such as tigers and elephants in China demonstrates the idea of nature as being subservient to the needs of humans as habitat destruction to make way for more farm land (Marks, 2012: 221). In late imperial China, in the face of increasing cash crop production such as silk, the Chinese state was faced with a growing threat to food security. The Yongzheng Emperor in the Qing Dynasty in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> Century encouraged peasants to clear forests on land that was marginal for agriculture in order to grow grain crops, as more fertile land was being used for sericulture (Marks, 1996: 68-69). This ethos of putting utility ahead of other considerations would continue to the present day.

As we have seen in this section, Chinese agriculture has long practiced multi-cropping and multicomponent agriculture such as the sericulture model in the South of China. However, continued population pressure led to pressure to increase yields and therefore intensify production. The ethic of putting humans above nature was

evident in decisions to increase agricultural land by increasing farming on marginal lands, which proved to be disastrous with the loss of animal habitat and environmental degradation such as erosion and landslides. This ethic would continue into the republican and communist eras with the introduction of synthetic agricultural inputs such as nitrogen fertilisers and pesticides that accompanied industrialisation in China.

### **Modernising Agricultural Production after Imperial China**

In this section I discuss agricultural production during the republican and high communist eras from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century until the opening up and reforms following the death of Mao Zedong in the late 1970s. Successive regimes led by the nationalist government and then the communists sought to modernise China, albeit from with different visions of modernity. This modernisation also included agricultural production, as the two governments started to change with the introduction of chemical inputs. Anna Lora-Wainright (2009) notes that chemicals are used to obtain higher yields of produce for markets and also to yield produce with a better appearance. The use of chemicals in agriculture is a result of supportive policy settings by the central government in China. As Robert Weller points out, both the nationalist and communist governments built regimes of chemical-based agriculture as part of their visions for modernising China when they came to power (Weller, 2006: 49). Increasing use of agricultural inputs reflected the continued belief that nature was something to be conquered by humans. The continued intensive cultivation of land and commercialisation in China leading to increasing exports of organic matter, which used to be recycled back to farm land, had left much of nearly all the land in China depleted of nutrients (Marks, 2012: 250). By 1949 when the

communists came to power nearly all of the farm land in China was deficient in nitrogen.

Mao Zedong took this position to an extreme by pronouncing nature as an obstacle to be attacked and conquered in what Judith Shapiro (2001) calls “Mao’s War on Nature”. Thus, as Eugene Anderson (2014) wryly notes the people remembered the grain part all too readily and resorted to monocultures forgetting the balanced agroecological systems of the past. The war on the four pests including sparrows for allegedly eating grain proved to be catastrophic as the sparrows were also a natural predator for insect pests (Shapiro, 2001). The resulting decrease in predators led to insect plagues, which may have contributed to the famines during the Great Leap Forward. The lack of predators also led to increasingly excessive pesticide use, as pests flourished thanks to the imbalance in the food chain when the sparrows were wiped out.

Even though much of China’s food production was organic prior to 1950 (Smil, 2004), there still were signs of modernisation projects being carried out in agriculture. Weller points out both the nationalist and communist governments built regimes of chemical-based agriculture as part of their visions for modernising China when they came to power (Weller 2006: 49). The range of different chemical fertilisers also grew. The highest annual output of chemical fertilisers before 1949 was 227,000 tonnes with average annual import of 25,000 tonnes. Fertiliser output grew to 1,333,000 tonnes in 1959, and from 10.5 million tonnes in 1966 to 14 million tonnes in 1970 (Kuo 1972: 100-101). As Leslie Kuo notes:

*“Prior to the Communist regime, ammonium sulphate was the only chemical fertiliser produced in China....Ammonium nitrate and calcium superphosphate were produced for the first time during*



*the First Five-Year Plan, and ammonium bicarbonate, fused phosphate, ammonia water and ammonium chloride during the Second Five-Year Plan. In 1962, nitrogen fertilisers produced in Communist China included ammonium nitrate, ammonium sulphate, ammonium chloride, calcium, cyan amide, urea, ammonia water, and ammonium bicarbonate; phosphorous fertilizers included defluorinated phosphate fertiliser, superphosphate, and mixed nitrogen and phosphorous fertilisers; and potassium fertilisers included potassium sulphate, potassium chloride, and mixed nitrogen fertilisers” (1972: 103).*

During the Republican era, China’s chemical fertiliser industry consisted mainly of two nitrogen fertiliser plants, one set up by the Japanese Dairen and the other by the Yung Li Company, a Chinese private enterprise near Nanjing. Under the communist government’s first and second Five-Year Plans, the two existing plants were expanded and three other nitrogen fertiliser plants were built in Kirin, Taiyuan and Lanzhou. However, there was still a shortage of fertilise in China, and in the late 1960s Japan became an important supplier of Chemical fertilisers to China, in particular, ammonium sulphate, which totalled 2,459,000 metric tonnes. This increased to 2,848,000 metric tonnes in 1969. In 1970 Japan exported 5,470,000 metric tonnes of chemical fertilisers to China. China also imported 3 million tonnes of nitrogen fertilisers produced by the Swiss based firm Nitrex, which was comprised of ten producers and exporters of fertiliser from Belgium, West Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Norway, Austria and Switzerland in the 1967/68 fiscal year (Kuo ,1972: 111). Kuo notes that the domestic fertiliser production capacity was also increased by the Communist government with over 20 new fertiliser plants having

been built “by the end of 1969” (Kuo, 1972: 104). There were also several native fertiliser plants built in communes during this period, which produced fertilisers of lower quality than those of the large plants (Kuo, 1972 104-105).

Several scholars assessing this period of Chinese agriculture pointed to a shortage of chemical fertilisers to make up for diminishing soil quality (Kuo, 1972; Marks, 2012). As Kuo (1972: 112) pointed out, “even if Chemical fertilizers could be provided in sufficient quantities, there remains the question of how to use fertilizers in the communes. It has been suggested that specialized personnel be entrusted with the handling of chemical fertilizers”. Sometimes the farmers themselves refused to use the fertiliser. For example farmers in Sichuan, Shandong, Zhejiang and Jiangsu found that the smell of the liquid ammonia fertiliser issued to them to make up for low sulphuric acid in the soil had a repellent odour. “Some peasants complained that once they handled the fertilizer they would lose their sense of smell forever” (Kuo, 1972: 112). By the time of Mao’s death in 1976, 40 percent of nitrogen fertilisation on farms came from synthetic fertilisers. This amount increased to a record of close to 75 percent in 2000 (Smil, 2004). Entering the 1980s the demand for synthetic fertilisers among peasants was still very high and availability was still scarce. This was mainly due to the more rapid effectiveness of synthetic fertilisers in comparison to natural fertilisers, which were cheaper and more readily available. Natural fertilisers took five years to take effect, while synthetic fertilisers brought instant results (Oi, 1986).

The impact and reliance of agricultural production on synthetic nitrogen fertilisers is evident in the increase in the production of plant protein from 90 kilograms per hectare in 1950 using organic methods to 250 kilograms in 2000 with the use of synthetic fertilisers (Smil, 2004: 200). The polluting of waterways as a

result of the leaching from soils has resulted in levels of nitrogen in the drinking water supply that exceed WHO (World Health Organisation) recommended safety levels (Smil, 2004: 226). There have also been algal blooms that killed bottom feeding marine life. The polluting impact of synthetic fertilisers would eventually attract the attention of environmental activists and NGOs as I will discuss in Chapter Eight.

The development of synthetic pesticides in China followed a similar path to that of synthetic fertilisers. Prior to the communist government China had only three pesticide factories in Shanghai, Beiping and Shenyang. The factories were operated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry under the nationalist government. The number of factories increased steadily after 1949 with a number of new plants across the country. In 1958 the government aimed to address concerns about the quality and quantity of pesticides by creating the Scientific Research Office for Native Pesticides, which commissioned a book titled *Zhongguo Tu Nongyao Ci (The Manual of Chinese Native Pesticides)*, published in 1959. The book covered 522 items that were effective forms of plant protection including 403 plants and 199 minerals and other materials. The pesticide supply also increased during this time and by 1963 it was estimated that China was producing 60 different types of pesticide, an increase from 20 types in 1957 and 30 types in 1959. According to Kuo (1972: 178), in the 1970s, “some pesticides are not processed in accordance with specifications, and there is no inspection of the products. Instructions for the use of such highly poisonous pesticides such as ‘1605’ and dementon are not adequate”.

In some parts of China traditional techniques such as terracing continued to be used (Kuo, 1972: 129). A farmer from Inner Mongolia born in the 1970s told me that he grew up on produce grown without synthetic inputs and that synthetic inputs

did not reach his part of Inner Mongolia until the 1990s. A point confirmed by Kuo, who noted that at the time of his research, “the use of modern pesticides in Mainland china has thus far been restricted to state farms and large communes” (Kuo, 1972: 185). Kuo pointed out that native pesticides had both advantages and disadvantages. Firstly, they were easier to produce and cost less. Secondly, they could be applied safely on a variety of crops. However, there were also disadvantages including the seasonality and geographical specificity of various elements required for production. Furthermore, production and application were more labour intensive (Kuo, 1972: 179-180), an issue that we will turn to in the next section. In addition to native or biopesticides, natural predators for insect pests were also used at this time. For example, in Zhejiang, Hubei and Sichuan red ladybugs were bred as a natural predator for certain beetles (Kuo, 1972: 183). In their study of integrated pest management in the wet rice paddies of China, Mangan and Mangan (1998) noted that knowledge of insect predators had become increasingly rare. They found that “while farmers may indeed be able to name and identify four or five major rice pests, it is the exceptional famer who can provide the local name even for two insects/spider predators or parasitoids that kill those pests” (1998: 211). While there was a loss of knowledge, Santos found that local farmers continued to practice techniques which are ascribed as “backward” such as spacing of crops, and the use of “a wide variety of organic and non-organic natural substances aimed at maintaining and enhancing the ‘soil’s strength’” (2011: 494). These substances include urine and human manure. Santos argues that one of the factors for decreasing use of these techniques stems from the Maoist period when such traditional practices were dismissed as being “backward” (2011: 497). Anna Lora-Wainright (2009) points out that chemicals are used to obtain higher yields of produce for markets and also to yield produce with a

better appearance. The use of chemicals in agriculture is a result of supportive policy settings by the central government in China, as discussed above. In her study of cancer in the village of Langzhong in Sichuan, Anna Lora-Wainright notes that farmers would use chemical fertilisers and pesticides to maximise yields for produce that is intended for markets, while refraining from the use of these technologies in food for their own consumption in order to minimise health risks (2009: 67).

In his study of farming in the Yangtze delta, Huang notes that four factors influenced productivity during the Mao era. These factors were the increased labour pool with the mobilisation of women into the agricultural labour force, state control of water, the introduction of chemical and mechanical agricultural technologies such as pesticides, chemical fertiliser and tractors, and collectivisation (Huang, 1990: 231-233). Huang writes “improved water control, tractor ploughing, chemical fertilisers, and new seeds all contributed to increasing the productivity of land and labour” during the Mao era (Huang 1990: 239). The communist government also encouraged other efforts to boost production that were not petrochemical based such as raising hogs to produce manure (Kuo, 1972: 98) and the planting of green fertiliser crops such as sweet clover (Kuo, 1972: 100). Collectivisation also had advantages, as it facilitated economies of scale, which allowed households to utilise technologies such as electric pumps which would otherwise have required permission from each of the affected households (Fei, 1943: 173). There was even a push for triple cropping during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Huang, 1990: 281). The mobilisation of labour in the collectives also allowed infrastructure such as drainage ditches to be dug during the waterworks under the Great Leap Forward (Huang, 1990: 223). This is in contrast to the economy built on self-interest with the household responsibility system starting from the 1980s, which lead to the neglect of

many of these infrastructure projects (Huang, 1990: 247). Up to the mid-1980s the government was still trying to develop suitably large scale farming to support this infrastructure (Huang, 1990: 248). One solution was to absorb excess labour from the land in factories, which created some of the impetus for rural industry.

The power of the state also shaped production. The state set production quotas for grain crops such as rice. Quotas were based on target yields rather than actual yields, forcing peasant households to put the state first, as they would have to meet the quota even if it left them with less than enough for their own consumption. Households could improve their lot by joining a collective, as the state made it easier for collectives to obtain procurement exemptions and waivers than individual households (Huang, 1990: 174). Double cropping across the board was implemented by state planners in 1969, as they believed that intensification of the land would lead to more grain, without taking into account the cost (Huang, 1990: 186). These policies would be reversed in the post Mao era during the 1980s, as responsibility for maintaining the fields was passed back to individual households in 1982 (Huang, 1990: 195) and the double cropping of rice was stopped in 1985 (Huang, 1990: 176). However, in certain parts of China decisions on planting were still passed on from the top as recently as the late 1980s (Huang, 1990: 196).

In his study of his home village in Suzhou in the province of Jiangsu in the Yangtze delta, Xiaotong Fei notes that vegetables were grown and kept for household consumption, sold to pay taxes, rent and wages or to buy goods that the household required (1943: 59). During the Mao era vegetables were grown as a side line to communal production (Huang, 1990: 203). Attempts to do away with private plots in villages such as Huayangqiao during the Great Leap Forward were unsuccessful, as attempts to organise labour, transportation and storage failed. By

1962 private production of vegetables was reinstated. Rural households were able to produce vegetables for their own consumption without going through the collectives (Huang, 1990: 203-204). This could also be interpreted as resistance in the Yangtze delta to collectivisation. With the price of vegetables increasing household vegetable gardens would survive into the contemporary era of rural industrialisation (Huang, 1990: 215).

In more recent times rural industry and rural to urban migration by young workers seeking economic opportunities in the cities have also drained some of the prime labour from the land to factories leaving the elderly, the weak and children behind to farm the land in the villages (Huang, 1990: 256). This puts even further pressure on farmers to use chemical inputs to support the production of vegetables for the market from village vegetable gardens. The result has been a system that is increasingly reliant on chemical fertilisers and pesticides which are major concerns for food safety, and environmental pollution as a result of runoff and soil leaching. Another problem is that the alternative is often laborious, for example applying night soil requires farmers to carry loads of manure which may not be feasible in instances when stronger men and women have migrated out of the villages (Lora-Wainright, 2009: 65).

The introduction of synthetic agricultural inputs allowed for increased agricultural production in the face of diminishing soil quality. The use of synthetic inputs also coincided with a continuation and also extension of the idea of nature as something to be conquered and humanised with Mao's war on nature during the high communist era. These factors would undergird beliefs among peasant farmers of the importance of synthetic inputs and the need to eradicate pests and weeds with the use of pesticides and herbicides. The modern farmer in China today is one who uses

synthetic inputs to maximise their yields. Weeds would be sprayed with herbicides, produce would be sprayed with pesticides to ward off pests and synthetic fertilisers are applied where there are shortages of nitrogen. Those who maintain the old ways before synthetic inputs are regarded as backward, and for an increasingly stigmatised peasant population, the label of backwardness is keenly felt. The increasing use of synthetic inputs such as synthetic fertilisers and pesticides combined with a continued ethic that treated nature as an obstacle to be conquered would prove to be one of the factors leading to increasing chemical pollution in waterways and food safety scandals. The state became increasingly concerned with these issues and responded with measures to change the way that agriculture was carried out. However, first we must turn to the other source of the problem, the distribution of food in China.

### **The Food Supply Chain in China**

In this section I discuss the food distribution system in China starting with the beginnings of markets in the Zhou period through to the communist era of communes to the contemporary free markets for food. The food distribution system has gone from self-sufficient rural peasant households selling surpluses to the cities and then cash cropping households importing grain from other regions, to state controlled distribution and production when the communist party took power. Today, in the post-reform era food production and distribution is no longer controlled by the government. The changes in the food supply chain have also seen changes in food safety concerns, as the opening up of markets has increased the physical and social distance between food producers and consumers leading to reduced accountability.



Markets in cities selling all manner of goods including food have long been part of Chinese society. There were growing urban populations during the Zhou dynasty in towns and cities, which had markets selling things that the urbanites did not make (Marks, 2012: 71). Markets with reciprocal contracts were fully emerged by the warring states period in the third century BC. Historian Robert Marks writes, “During the Song [Dynasty], rural periodic markets began to be established...in the lower Yangtze region, the area of China with the most people, and in areas, mostly throughout the south, where goods and products from mountainous regions were brought down to lowland markets for exchange for food, cloth and salt” (Marks, 2012 173-174). By the Ming and Qing dynasties in late imperial China, markets were a definitive feature of the Chinese economy, as they “began to coalesce into a hierarchically structured marketing system that then commercially lined most of the empire [of China]” (Marks, 2012: 173-174). .

When the communist government came to power in 1949 the state took control of markets and the distribution of food in urban areas. Peasant households in rural China were merged into communes that aimed for self-sufficiency with surplus produce exported to cities and areas with deficits in agricultural production (Croll, 1982: 49). After 1953 the government took control of the production, pricing and distribution of essential crops such as grains, tea and oil seeds, nationally. For example, the government instituted a programme of rationing to curtail inflation (Croll, 1982: 51). The government’s role as the middleman connecting food producers in the country to consumers in the city was reflected in the main food safety concerns of the day. As Yan (2015) notes, at the time the main food safety concern was food poisoning from poor hygiene in government instituted communal

canteens rather than food that had been adulterated by producers or sellers such as restaurants and markets in the post-Mao reform era.

In the last three decades following the death of Mao Zedong and opening up of China's economy the food system has also been reformed from state run food distribution to increasing privatisation (Stringer et al, 2009: 1774). One of the earliest sectors of the economy to be reformed was the agricultural sector. The majority of vegetables in China are still grown on small holdings at an average size of less than 0.6 hectares per household (Wang et al, 2009: 1792). Although there are more and more corporate, agribusiness distributors facilitating economies of scale in the distribution of food, the food distribution network in China is still dominated by small traders who buy from farmers in villages and sell to wholesalers, with only a minority of retailers purchasing directly from farmers or farmers' cooperatives (Zhang and Pan, 2013: 510). Wholesalers were a distribution point for retailers including supermarkets and wet markets.

The contemporary food distribution system in Chinese metropolises such as Shanghai is characterised by a variety of retail channels including supermarkets, wet markets, street markets and small retailers such as kiosks (Goldman, 2000; Zhang and Pan, 2013). In their study of wet markets in Shanghai Zhang and Pan (2013) found that the majority of consumers buy their vegetables and fresh produce from wet markets or street markets rather than supermarket due to freshness and taste (See also Klein, 2013). Produce in in wet markets or street markets where farmers would sell produce directly to consumers had higher turnover and therefore fresher produce. Zhang and Pan (2013: 509) found that "vegetables sold at supermarkets [would] usually arrive around eight o'clock the night before" and would be stored for half a day before being purchased by consumers. In the case of Shanghai, food would come

from beyond the immediate region from provinces such as Shandong (Stringer et al, 2009: 1777). One of the main problems with this system is that there is little emphasis put on food safety, as several small traders compete against each other on the basis of price at the expense of quality, such as low levels of chemical residue (Wang et al, 2009: 1800). Yan (2012) points out that the distance between producer and consumer, both physically and socially, is also a contributing factor since many farmers only care about their own wellbeing and completely disregard the wellbeing of distant consumers whom they are unlikely to ever meet.

Markets have long been a part of the Chinese food distribution and the distance between food producers and consumers has not always been close in China. When the communist party took power, they instituted policies of state control of agricultural production and distribution, effectively making the state the connection between food producers and consumers in the cities. With the passing of Mao Zedong, the communist party opened up the market for agricultural produce. The opening up reforms and increasing social and spatial distance between producer and consumer in the Chinese food supply chain led to a collapse in accountability, which has been one of the main contributing factors to food safety scandals. In the face of these concerns the state has also responded with various policy initiatives, which I will turn to next.

### **Alternatives to Petro-Chemical Agriculture in China: Ecological Agriculture, Organic Agriculture and Green Food in China**

In this section I discuss the history of the three main alternatives to conventional agriculture in China – Chinese Ecological Agriculture (CEA), Green Food and Organic Agriculture that are a response to the food safety scandals arising from the

contemporary food system in China. These initiatives by different government authorities shows that the state is aware of the issues facing the food system in China, and also of the need to be in harmony with nature, a pivot that took place in the early 2000s under Hu Jintao (Marks, 2012). Yet, this is only one level of the state, and there are signs that some of these measures are experiencing scandals such as false certification due to systemic corruption.

The UNEP (United Nations Environmental Programme) Report, *Ecofarming: The Chinese Experience*, notes that CEA was implemented in three phases in China. The first phase from 1980-1983 commenced when funds were allocated by NEPA (the National Environmental Protection Agency) to begin experiments with ecological farming methods, after scientists voiced growing concerns about the lack of ecological principles in agricultural development policies (2002: 5). According to Richard Sanders, CEA was first suggested by Ye Xanji in 1981 as a development strategy for the agricultural sector in China (2000a: 67). The ten year period from 1984-1993 saw the implementation of pilot programmes in most of the provinces and autonomous regions in China. These included sites in Taixing County in Jiangsu province, the villages of Shanglijia and Tengtou in Zhejiang province among many others. By 1990 there were 29 CEA pilot programmes at county level, 138 at township level and over 1200 at village or farm level. In the third phase starting from 1994 CEA was further expanded with a five year national CEA project funded by several government ministries and departments (UNEP 2002: 6).

Sanders notes that CEA intends to do more than just applying ecologically friendly principles to agricultural practices. CEA was also intended to address problems with rural economies in China including meeting the material expectations of rural populations and maintaining employment in rural areas to reduce the amount

of rural to urban migration (2000a: 68). CEA seeks to create a solution to these problems through the use of scientific as well as organic agricultural practices. Sanders notes that the theme of harmony between humanity and nature is similar to the cosmologies of Daoism (Sanders, 2000: 69). With strong population pressures the Chinese have been practicing “a system of intensive organic agriculture, based on highly developed systems of recycling, systems which fitted well with the Daoist philosophy which stressed that in order to live at peace with the world it was necessary to work harmoniously with the cycles of nature” (Sanders, 2000: 69-70). This is illustrated by practices such as the emphasis on using green fertilisers including manure (UNEP, 2002: 6), intercropping and growing crops to be ploughed back into the soil as fertiliser (Sanders, 2000: 70).

In the early 1990s food policy measures also started to be developed in China. 1992 saw the establishment of the China Green Food Development Centre (CGFDC), which has been promoted by Ministry of Agriculture since 1994 (Sanders, 2000: 75). There are three streams of certification for environmentally friendly agricultural products in China today. The current system of Green Food labelling places produce in two categories – grade A and grade AA. Grade A produce is grown with reduced levels of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, while grade AA produce meets international standards of organic food production. Then there is the stream that is certified by international organisations or the Organic Food Development Centre in China that conforms to IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) standards (Thiers, 2005; Sanders, 2006b). Organic Agriculture in accordance with IFOAM standards has also been promoted since 1994 as the Resource Conservation Department at the Nanjing Institute of Environmental Sciences, which was responsible for CEA up until that point, was turned into China’s

first Organic Food Centre (Sanders, 2000: 76). Organisations such as the CGFDC have helped to establish markets for ecological food products and also aided in their distribution to a population that is increasingly concerned about food safety. This includes setting up green food supermarkets in large metropolitan centres such as Beijing and second tier cities such as Suzhou (Li, 1994: 26).

Optimists point to a growing middle class (Yan et al, 2012) and the rapid adoption by farmers of new standards and labelling in the face of growing concern over food safety, (Paull, 2008: 11) as indicators of the ascendance of ecological agriculture. However, they have not taken into account the difficulties such as the cost of certification, false labelling and low levels of consumer trust in China (Kanthor, 2011). In 2011, Wal-Mart closed thirteen of its stores in China for fifteen days after the Chongqing city government found that pork being sold as organic did not meet the appropriate labelling standards for organic food (Bradsher, 2011). The high premiums on ecological food also provide an incentive for opportunistic profiteering. Certain producers may label all their output as organic or green food even though this only applies to a proportion of it. Others may just be cashing in on the craze without having the produce. This is also a matter of enforcement of labelling standards (Zhou, 2012).

The role of the state underpins much of the discourse on CEA and Organic Agriculture. Thiers notes that the image of an individual farmer converting to organic at their own initiative “is rare in the OFDC system and non-existent in Green Food” as a result of the pervasiveness of the state in China (2005: 8). Other scholars such as Richard Sanders argue that the state is benign. He notes that agricultural policy makers in the central government have been concerned about the heavy use of synthetic chemical inputs in agriculture since the early 1980s (2000a: 26), but could

do more to facilitate CEA and organic agriculture (Sanders, 2006a). Paul Thiers is more critical, arguing that the Chinese state can be an impediment to the development of organic agriculture in China due to the conflicts of interest in its roles as regulator, market competitor and input provider. Thiers argues that these conflicts of interest prevent efforts to monitor Chinese organic agriculture's compliance with international standards (2002a: 414), as much of the conversion to organic agriculture in China is driven by local governments, who seek to capitalise on the profitable export market for organic produce (2003: 6).

Thiers (2002a; 2003) describes the political economy in China as one of fragmented states, referring to different fragments of the state operating at different levels of government, from the village level, the county level, the provincial level and up to the central government. A policy directive from the central government may not be successfully implemented due to the resistance from lower levels of government. This is very much the case with organic certification (Thiers, 2002a; Thiers, 2003) when the central government created policies that standardised certification in China with international standards requiring independent inspection. Local officials resisted these changes as the inspections clashed with their interests in the form of local organic food enterprises which they had established as village enterprises to take advantage of the high price premiums that are being offered for organic food (Thiers, 2002a: 414). In his study of international certification of organic farms in China, Thiers (2002b) notes that the role of local government officials in establishing organic food enterprises has put pressure on farmers to produce greater yields leading many of them to use synthetic inputs in secret. He points out that many smallholder farmers who participate in organic farming are pressured into it by local officials (2002b: 8). Even foreign financed organic farms

are subject to state intervention, as they must have a local joint venture partner (Thiers, 2002b: 368).

The state realising the problems of food safety in China has reacted by implementing several measures to create safer food including Green Food and certified organic food. However, problems remain in the implementation due to corruption in the system, as organic certification is falsified. These problems leave consumers stranded with greater uncertainty about the trustworthiness of the system. The distance between producer and end consumer can lead to many possibilities of fraud, from the peasant planting the fields in an organic vegetable enterprise in a village who uses synthetic pesticides in secret to false labelling by state enterprises due to the profitability of organic food.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, the problems with China's food system were the accumulation of factors across thousands of years. Starting from population pressures in ancient times that led to cycles of productivity gain and population increase that put increasing pressure to obtain more yield from the land. Initially this led to efficient methods that were ecologically balanced as Eugene Anderson (2014) suggests. This tied into beliefs about harmonious relations between humans and nature in early Chinese philosophies such as Daoism. However, such beliefs were eventually overtaken by beliefs about the superior position of humans to nature, with schools of thought from Confucianism and legalism through to the communist views of nature as something to be tamed and conquered. This position was taken to extremes during the high communist era with Mao's war on nature.



Although China started out with ecological advantages that allowed agricultural land to be highly productive, this productivity reached its limits as the population grew through five millennia, and commercialism saw the export of nutrient rich organic materials off farms. Heading into the communist era, technological advances in chemistry led to increasing production of synthetic chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The dismissal of techniques such as the use of night soil fertilisation and natural predators for insect pests as part of integrated pest management systems as backward has also led to the loss of this knowledge and the replacement of these methods with the use of synthetic inputs, which pollute the environment. This combined with the continued need to boost yields in the face of an increasing population was a contributing factor to the increasingly high levels of synthetic input use resulting in increasing health risks and concerns over food safety.

The government has implemented various institutional responses to these problems. These solutions include the introduction of CEA, with the produce from these farms were labelled as Green Food. China also adopted organic certification standards in accordance with IFOAM standards. However, the increasing distance between producer and consumer in the food supply chain has led to scandals such as false organic certification labels, which further decrease institutional trust in the food system.

In summary, a combination of population pressures, beliefs about human superiority to nature, and increasing social and spatial distance between food producers and consumers has left China with a food system that is rife with food safety scandals. Even measures by authorities such as CEA and organic certification cannot overcome these problems. The result is a population looking for ways to reconnect with food producers, but also weary of making the wrong kind of

connection. This connection with food producers is also what the ecological farmers are trying to establish. However, before I elucidate the challenges that the farmers face in establishing these connections in China's food system, we must first understand the ecological farmers themselves.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Growing Ecological Food in Shanghai**

Having established how ecological agriculture came to be an imperative and how the demand for ecological food in China's food system came to be created, in this chapter I shed light on the challenges that ecological farmers face in the fields growing produce that they can legitimately claim to be free from synthetic inputs. I introduce the ecological farmer informants that I work with and discuss the different ways that they farm. Focussing on the cases of four farmers, I show that there are different ways of growing produce without the use of synthetic inputs. The farmers' farming practices can also put them at odds with fellow villagers and with their labourers. These differences arise from the alternative approach that the ecological farmers have to farming in comparison to their fellow villagers, which reflects their ethics and world views. I illustrate how these ecological farmers deviate from conventional farming, and how their differing practices reflect different values that occasionally lead to competitive tensions between them, and also to tensions with neighbouring villagers and farm labourers, who do not share their ecological ethos. Because of these differences the farmers are unable to have buffer zones between their farms and farms that use synthetic agricultural inputs, which is one of the necessary criteria for organic certification.

I argue that the differences between the ecological farmers demonstrates that while they are alternative producers, they do not constitute an alternative food movement or network, as these differences give rise to tensions between the farmers that stop them from cooperating under any sort of fixed arrangement. These differences included their standards of input sourcing to their use of different farming

methods such as polytunnels led to mutual criticism among the farmers. Furthermore, there is no coherent ideology that governs these farmers to form a movement under the common umbrella, or more literally, the canopy of the farmers' market. More often than not there is an underlying rivalry especially when the farmers are selling similar produce such as rice or tomatoes, as their different price points lead to a contest between quality in the case of the more expensive produce and value for money for the cheaper produce. Some of the farmers such as Old Zhao and Sister Wang are engaging in projects of autonomy as members of the middle class who can afford to rent and farm plots of land and rely on off farm income from their spouses to support their families, while their farms are getting off the ground. Others such as Clear Water Grain Farm are altruistic, while other farms such as Pearl Bay Farm are more commercially oriented.

I begin the chapter by discussing the different practices of the farmers that give rise to these rivalries. I then shed light on how the farmers' practices differ from those of their neighbours and therefore deprive them of the opportunity to gain legitimate organic certification. I also discuss the differences between the farmers' beliefs about farming practices and those of their labourers leading to arguments and the departure of the labourers from the farms. At the heart of these tensions is that the alternative agricultural practices of the farmers are deviating from conventional modernity. Rather than seeing the attractions of efficiency, the ecological see problems of food safety. Where the farmers grow their produce without synthetic inputs and conventional, their neighbouring villagers use synthetic inputs, as it is more efficient in terms of labour and also yield. The ecological farmers do not put as much emphasis on these efficiencies. However, as I will show some farmers place more importance on efficiency than others.

## **Growing Ecological Food in China: The Different Practices and Legitimacy of the Ecological farmers**

One evening, I received a phone call from an anxious Big Sister Wang, who said, “My sister is refusing to cooperate with Old Zhao and the others because they use synthetic fertiliser”.

“Are you sure?” I replied. At the time of the phone call, I had been visiting the farms with the farmers’ market organiser Old Yu. He and his friend Little Chen had checked the soil for signs of synthetic fertiliser use, and many of the farmers’ had confirmed that they use organic fertiliser.

“They admitted it when my sister had dinner with them. I don’t know what to do,” Big Sister Wang continued.

“Well they did say that they used organic fertiliser. You should check with Old Yu and ask your sister again,” I replied. Later I was able conversed with her younger sister, Sister Wang, who actually ran the farm, and confirm that she was not saying that the farms use synthetic fertilisers, but that the other farmers were using mass-produced organic fertiliser. This misunderstanding was understandable given that it was only a couple of months since Big Sister Wang had taken a sabbatical from her work at a state own enterprise to help her sister on the farm. So she did not have enough experience with farming to know the difference. Nonetheless, this tense incident illustrated the diversity of practices among the ecological farmers. While the farmers are cast by many as a single, homogenous group, in this chapter I show that they are anything but. Some farmers such as Sister Wang refused to use mass-produced external agricultural inputs. Other ecological farmers were not as uncompromising in their beliefs. Some ecological farmers such as Old Zhao used

organic fertiliser and bio pesticides. These different approaches to farming reflect the different beliefs of different farmers, and inevitably leads to tensions between the farmers in the market place, as we shall see. In this section I discuss the different agricultural practices that four different ecological farmers use. The first being Camelia Grove, which strove to operate in as close to a closed loop in regard to production, as possible. Next I discuss the case of Old Zhao, who has moved from using conventional inputs occasionally to input substitution. I finish by discussing two farms, Pearl Bay Farm, which took a more intensive approach to farming and Clear Water Grain Farm, which was more altruistic.

#### *Camelia Grove: The Ideological Purists*

At the other end of the spectrum were farmers like the Sister Wang, whose farm was run in as close to a closed loop as she could make it. Before she started farming in 2011 Sister Wang started her working life as a lecturer in the military academy and then a Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) teacher. She got into farming to grow safe food for her friends and family, and frequently touted the health benefits of consuming her produce. In our first encounter she told me that consuming produce helped overcome a chronic back pain and also helped her husband's uncle recover from cancer. Starting off with a patch of land in Nanhui, Sister Wang eventually found land on Chongming Island, where she grew rice and used a flock of mallard (wild) ducklings to peck at insect pests and weeds in the rice fields while fertilising them with their faeces. Rice grown this way was known as *yadao mi* literally, duck rice, as it is grown with the aid of ducks.

When I asked her where she got her farming knowledge from she told me she got ideas from all over. She said, "I know all about permaculture." For instance, she

complained about her peasant workers weeding when they had nothing to do. “They keep pulling out weeds even when I tell them not to. The weeds are a good thing.” Indeed, I had been told by an old hand at ecological farming that the weeds are there as part of an integrated pest management strategy, as they would attract the pests away from the crops. He was indignant at the ignorance of the local officials who suggested that he remove the weeds in his farm, as the officials felt that the weeds were an eyesore. During December 2014 when I went on a visit to Camelia Grove Sister Wang pointed out rows of broad beans in what had once been a rice field. She said, “Once they are grown, we will not harvest them, but plough them back into the soil [as green manure].”

Sister Wang refused to use any external inputs that she could not trace such as mass-produced organic fertiliser. She was unsure of the origins of the mass-produced organic fertiliser, and pointed out that even though it was made from pig manure as opposed to synthetic chemicals the manure was probably from piggeries where pigs were given antibiotics and other synthetic chemicals. Sister Wang got additional fertiliser from a nearby free range chicken farm where she could be sure that the chickens were raised without antibiotics and their feed was not standard industrial chicken feed, thus ensuring that the manure was as non-synthetic as possible. This was both costly in terms of labour to carry it back to her farm and also because she bought this fertiliser from the other farmer at the market rate rather than at a subsidised price. She was uncompromising in the inputs that she used on her farm, as she also refused to bio pesticides, choosing to use chilli pepper or nicotine sprays made from recycled cigarette butts. “If I use something from outside the farm, I have to know where it comes from,” she proclaimed.

Camelia Grove attracted praise from outsiders, who were ecological farming enthusiasts. Daniel, who I met when he was working with her as a volunteer to man her stall at Our Piece of Ground farmers' market, was effusive about the soil at Camelia Grove. He beamed, "look at all the activity in the soil – the insect life, the earth worms, the frogs." In a subsequent conversation he confirmed that he chose to work with Sister Wang because she had in his opinion, the best treatment of the soil. Camelia Grove's produce was endorsed as the best in the market by Teacher Yang, a long time practitioner of ecological agriculture who had come down from Beijing after having worked with Little Donkey farm, a pioneering ecological farm in Beijing (See Yan et al, 2011 for more discussion about Little Donkey Farm in Beijing). This quality came from Sister Wang's motivation for becoming a farmer.

#### *Old Zhao: A More Pragmatic Farmer*

Some farmers used organic fertiliser, bio pesticides and bio herbicides in a case of ingredient substitution where conventional synthetic inputs are exchanged for natural occurring inputs (See Guthman, 2004). In this section I discuss the case of the pragmatic farmer, Old Zhao. Old Zhao used to be a business man in the leather industry. He had a share portfolio to help support himself financially, as his farm was close to breaking even, but not quite, at the time of this research in 2015. Originally from Chongming Island he went back to the land as a way of ensuring a safe food supply for his own family. On a visit to his farm with Old Yu he shared with us, "I saw a lot of unsavoury practices in the food market. When my daughter was nine her grandmother bought a couple of chickens from the market and we found they had gone off. It's just too vicious. So I decided to grow my own food. I happened to meet a teacher (*Laoshi*), who keeps turtles and he taught me about farming." Old Zhao



kept turtles and crayfish as forms of insect pest control, and he would occasionally bring one or two turtles to sell at the farmers' market.

Old Zhao's produce was the cheapest at the market throughout the time of my fieldwork, starting at RMB6 (70 Pence) per catty (500 grams) in the initial stages of my fieldwork, by the end of my fieldwork his produce was on average RMB8 (93 Pence) per catty. The price increase reflected his switch from using a small amount of synthetic inputs to not using any at all. When I first started volunteering at the market in late September of 2014 he was using a small amount of synthetic chemicals. As Old Zhao remarked to me when I first met him, "You see these farmers, I have a higher, more consistent yield than them because they don't use any synthetic inputs at all. I use a little bit occasionally when there is an outbreak of pests." Indeed, he was based in a green food production zone on Chongming Island (see Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of the different regulatory frameworks surrounding agricultural practices in China such as Certified Organic, Green Food and No Public Harm). By the end of my fieldwork he was not using any synthetic inputs at all, as he felt that it was too much of a hassle to manage the appropriate dosages. However, he was still using biopesticides and herbicides as well as the mass-produced organic fertiliser subsidised by the government. Unlike, Sister Wang, Old Zhao also contracted local peasants to help him grow produce on his land, ecologically.

Thus, some of the other farmers such as the Wang Sisters were sceptical about Old Zhao's practices. One day in the summer of 2015 when I was out shopping with Big Sister Wang at a Korean supermarket selling vegetables that were supposedly grown without using any synthetic inputs. I picked some bok choy from the display cabinet. "Don't get those! Take the lettuce," Big Sister Wang warned me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Look, we’ve been trying to grow leafy greens without any success. In this [warm] weather they always get ravaged by pests. What makes you think that they can do it, if my sister can’t?”

“What about Old Zhao?”

“I wouldn’t take too much of his produce if I were you.”

Teacher Yang, a farm manager, who also ran a sustainable design company, felt that out of all the ecological farmers based on Chongming Island Sister Wang and another farmer who practiced permaculture had the best produce. Big Sister Wang and I chatted about this one day and she told me about a conversation she had with Little Hong a former employee of Teacher Yang’s. “Little Hong asked me why I worked with Old Zhao, as her boss [Teacher Yang] doesn’t really think much of Old Zhao’s produce.”

For his part Old Zhao felt that he was providing quality ecological produce at an affordable price. “We did the calculations and we can make some money with prices of RMB8-10 per catty for produce.” The inference being that the prices did not need to be high as those of Wang sisters. Old Zhao was cognisant of how price could be a barrier between farmer and potential customer in the market place. There were even more market oriented farmers than Old Zhao.

### *Pearl Bay Farm: A High Output Farm*

Every week at the Our Piece of Ground Farmers’ market Pearl Bay Farm’s table would be groaning with an assortment of fresh produce from Chinese greens such as Bok Choy and Chinese spinach to bean sprouts, beets and kale. Their display easily dwarfed that of the other farmers. Pearl Bay Farm’s approach was more intensive and

volume driven than that of any of the other farms at the farmers' market. The farm also had several fully paid staff members, with the farm owner rarely appearing at the market. Two staff members would come to the market most weeks with one manning the stall while the other made deliveries in the city to customers.

The owner had been farming since 2002, having previously been a financial services executive. The farm was located in the South East of Shanghai, closer to the city centre than the other farms at the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market. The farm was on a small 20mu (1.3 hectares) plot of land of which 40% of the land was rented out to customers who would visit the farm and tend to the crops themselves. Their output came from three rows of ten greenhouses that were three metres wide by ten metres long. When it came to pesticides they preferred to use chilli spray made from the chillies that they grew themselves rather than bio pesticides to control pests. One day when I was at the farm in one of the greenhouses to pick up some vegetables for hotpot at a friend's house we could see the spinach in the greenhouse was ravaged by pests with multiple holes and some that were completely eaten down to the stems. Looking at the leaves the worker said, "The chillies aren't ready. Looks like we'll have to use some bio pesticides."

"What do you usually use?" I asked.

"Chilli spray," he confirmed.

They had a reputation for scale and their stall was always brimming with produce at the market. At the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market in a university campus when the facilities director enquired about the potential for supplying part of the canteen's needs, the other farmers pointed to Pearl Bay Farm's stall. They had an exclusive contract to supply bean sprouts to a well-known health food chain with several branches across Shanghai, and at the time of my departure from the field they

were lined up with a contract to grow cucumbers for a restaurant. Their intensive approach was a marked contrast to the other farmers who maintained strict seasons and had limited yields on their produce. Thus, there would often be scepticism from other farmers about how Pearl Bay Farm achieved their volume of yield despite their small plot of land. Other farmers would often question the quality of their produce. I talked to Sister Wang about Pearl Bay Farm and their output one day. She was sceptical of their ability to produce so much without the use of synthetic inputs. “You’ll see. They’ve got to be using something. Come on!” She exclaimed in disbelief.

#### *Clear Water Grain Farm: A Farm with an Altruistic Vision*

Clear Water Grain farm is a farm that is owned by an ENGO (Environmental Non-Governmental Organisation) based in Shanghai specialising in dealing with water pollution. The farm was intended as a site to demonstrate how ecological farming can be a way to purify polluted water. Thus, they have a strong sustainability ethos. This included the use of different recycling bins for sorting trash such as plastics, paper and non-recyclables. The NGO was owned by Stephen, who used to work for the World Wildlife Fund in China.

The farm manager Little Su really exemplified the ethos of environmental sustainability. She enjoyed walking into the field barefooted and being in touch with nature. She would always be sad when she saw synthetic inputs being used on neighbouring farms. The first time I became aware of her sentiments was when we strolling around the village near her farm after dinner when the sun was still up on a July evening.

“What’s bugging you?” I asked picking up on her downtrodden demeanour.

“Oh. It’s nothing,” She replied. I paused and waited sensing that she had more to say. She continued, “Okay. What if there was a bad person [*huai ren*] doing some bad things near your farm ruining all the good work that you have been doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean there are people using synthetic pesticides and herbicides near our farm. What if it blows over?”

Indeed, a day later we saw an old lady with a case of chemicals on her back and spray nozzle as we left the gates of the farm and passed the adjacent plots. “See she’s spraying,” Little Su said. She was saddened by the damage that these people were doing to the environment and the good work she felt was being done on the farm. The farm used soy bean cake sourced from Steven’s home province of Zhejiang instead of mass-produced organic fertiliser. At the beginning of my time in the field their farm workers were from Zhejiang. However, by summer before I left the field they were employing local villagers. The chief labourer when I last visited the farm was a lady who had worked for a neighbouring ecological farm, and Little Su was more than happy to have her on board, as she felt that these workers did not need to be trained about the ethos of the farm, specifically the non-use of synthetic inputs.

Little Su and Stephen were idealistic in different ways. Little Su enjoyed being close to nature, and therefore stayed on the farm and in the village as much as she could. She would often walk around the fields in her bare feet and would suggest that I give it a try, as she enjoyed the feeling of being in communion with the land. Her appreciation of nature was similar to that of Sister Wang. On the other hand Stephen, seemed to hardly be on the farm. Even on the odd occasion when he would give me a lift to the farm he would leave straight away for a conference once he dropped me off. He had a bigger vision for protecting the waterways of the Yangtze Delta region.

The farm also had significant funding from the ENGO that Stephen ran, specifically in the form of a partnership with the corporate responsibility division of an international bank. On my final visit to the farm I arrived on a day when they were having a meeting with some stakeholders of the farm. During the meeting he talked about wanting to have five more farms within the next few years. Thus, Clear Water Grain Farm was part of Stephen's altruistic vision to protect waterways.

### **Diverse Practices, Competition and Disunity among Farmers**

The four cases I discussed above of Old Zhao, Pearl Bay Farm, Clear Water Grain Farm and Camelia Grove demonstrate the variety of different farming practices regarding input use that exist among these farmers. Their diverse practices can lead to tensions between the ecological farmers, as we saw earlier. These tensions also manifest themselves in backbiting and gossip that made it difficult for collaborators or the farmers themselves to form a unified group to take on projects that may be beneficial to them all.

The tension between the farmers was most apparent at the market. As Old Zhao remarked to Big Sister Wang one day during an idle period at a market, "You lot pursue a romantic ideal [*zui qiu wan mei*] [of farming]. Me I'm more realistic." This difference was notable in both the price and taste of the two farms' produce such as their peanuts. Old Zhao's peanuts sold for RMB10 per catty, while Sister Wang's peanuts were RMB15 per catty, but according to Sister Wang she was still selling at a loss, as the true cost should be RMB30 per catty. In terms of flavour Sister Wang's peanuts had an inherent sweetness that Old Zhao's did not.

After the phone conversation with Big Sister Wang, I was concerned about how this affected the Wang Sisters' willingness to cooperate with other farmers such as

Old Zhao, who had less stringent standards. When I broached this issue with Big Sister Wang, she also acknowledged the problem. I asked her, “Who has standards that your sister can find acceptable enough for you to cooperate with?”

“No one except her,” Big Sister Wang replied glumly. Eventually, Sister Wang did agree to cooperate with other farmers like Old Zhao again. This renewed sense of cooperation was evident when the two farmers organised a small farmers’ market with two other farmers at Crystal Bay Mansions, a gated community in the Pudong New District near Big Horizon Plaza. Referencing the earlier conversation that I had with Big Sister Wang, where Teacher Yang’s former staff member questioned what she saw in Old Zhao given the perceived inferiority of his produce, I replied, “Did you tell her that it’s because you think Old Zhao is a good guy [*ta ren hen hao*]?” Big Sister Wang chuckled and did not answer. There was something to be said for being pragmatic rather than idealistic in their approach to business opportunities, given the diversity of farming practices among the different farmers.

The similarity of the farmers’ produce was a point of competition, as the majority of the farms grew a mixture of rice and vegetables, which they brought to sell at the farmer’s market along with some fowl such as chickens or ducks. The main difference between them other than the different prices that the farmers would charge for their produce was their farming practices. It was difficult for consumers at the farmers’ market to tell the difference between different farming practices, as it was difficult for the farmers to show consumers at the market what agricultural inputs they used on their farms. The other possible, discernible difference was the taste of the produce, as I discussed above with the comparison between Old Zhao’s peanuts and Big Sister Wang’s peanuts. However, as Eugene Anderson (2005: 150)

notes, some people are more able to discern differences in the flavour of certain foods than other people.

The farmers were not above openly criticising each other's produce to make a sale. One of the grounds for criticism was the use of polytunnels. One day at the market in Crystal Bay Mansions a lady came to try some of Sister Wang's tomatoes. Sister Wang said, "See they're bright red and juicy, and I picked them this morning."

Old Zhao replied, "I have tomatoes too, but mine are grown outside (*lutian*) [as opposed to in polytunnels] like those of Camelia Grove. Old Zhao does not use them, and makes a point of his produce being superior not only based on price, but based on his non-use of polytunnels.

The presence of farmers with different practices and price points inevitably led to tensions between farmers, who use mass-produced organic fertilisers and those farmers who do not, especially on the part of those farmers who chose the more costly option of not using mass-produced organic fertilisers like Sister Wang. She would often complain about other farmers undercutting her prices at the market, whereas Old Zhao would often tell consumers that his produce was the same as Sister Wang's even though he used state subsidised mass-produced organic fertiliser. Old Zhao would often tell consumers that he had the same produce as Big Sister Wang, but at a fraction of the price such as aubergine. For example on one occasion when a lady passed by looking for eggplant and stopped at Big Sister Wang's stall, Old Zhao remarked, "I have aubergine as well, but mine are RMB8 (93 Pence) per catty" as opposed to RMB15 (GBP1.72) per catty for Camelia Grove's aubergine.

Big Sister Wang would complain to me, "Old Zhao keeps saying that our produce is the same, even though he uses [mass-produced] organic fertiliser and bio pesticides". One day after the market at Crystal Bay Mansions Old Zhao suggested



that the farmers pool together their customers in a group chat on the popular WeChat social media and messaging platform. He suggested doing the same for the customers and farmers at Our Piece of Ground market as well. Later Big Sister Wang remarked to me, “Old Zhao is very clever. He wants to pool together our customers because he knows that he can beat us on price.” Indeed, there was one occasion when Big Sister Wang forgot to reserve new season corn for a regular customer, who became upset and stopped buying from Camelia Grove. I asked Big Sister Wang about her, “What happened to the skinny girl that would come every week to pick up produce from you?”

“She stopped coming because I forgot to save some corn for her when she asked for it. Also, I think she’s been comparing our prices to some of the other stalls like Old Zhao’s and she’s buying from him instead.”

About a month later, Big Sister Wang bumped into her and I left them to chat while I carried things to Big Sister Wang’s car after the market at Big Horizon Plaza. I was keen to find out what came of the encounter from Big Sister Wang. “So what did she say?”

“Oh, she said she would come by and get some things from me next time.”

“So she’s not buying from Old Zhao anymore.”

It seemed that this customer had tasted Old Zhao’s produce and found it to be inferior in flavour compared to Camelia Grove’s.

Some parallels can be drawn to the situation of ingredient substitution and green washing in relation to organic food in the USA, where the benefits of alternative foods are appropriated by conventional food producers. The reputation of organic produce can be appropriated by large firms, who are not necessarily as committed to environmentally friendly practices. Critics such as Julie Guthman (1998) argue that

this is a product of industry regulations that emphasise inputs over process, as certification is more about what inputs are allowable in growing produce rather than how produce is grown. In their study of smallholders in Mexico Gomez Tovar et al (2005: 466) found that large agribusinesses have used such “green washing” by associating their products with the clean, green reputation of organic food. It was in this vain that Big Sister Wang felt that Old Zhao was reaping the benefits of being associated with them without paying the cost, and was therefore able to compete unfairly with them by undercutting Camelia Grove’s prices.

There is no denying that accessibility of ecological produce is limited to the affluent, as evident by public discussion about the price of alternative foods, mainly organic, in relation to conventional food (Goodman et al, 2012; Luetchford and Pratt, 2014). However, diverse practices also yield different price points for produce, which allows the produce to be more accessible to a greater number of consumers. For example a catty of spinach costs RMB2.50 (29 pence) at wet markets or supermarkets. Camelia Grove’s produce was the most expensive out of all the farmers at an average of RMB15 (GBP1.72) per catty for produce such as Spinach, while Old Zhao’s produce is usually RMB8 (93 pence) per catty. Pearl Bay Farm with produce including spinach costs RMB10 (GBP1.17) per catty prefers not to use bio pesticides and instead uses chilli spray, but they do use mass-produced organic fertiliser. So those who can afford it or prefer to spend more on food can choose to buy from Camelia Grove. If RMB15 (GBP1.75) per catty is too high they can consider Pearl Bay Farm and finally Old Zhao at the lower end of the market. Consumers who are unaware of the different farming practices of the ecological farmers may just choose the produce based on price unless they have compared the flavour of the produce, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Five.

During my time in the field there were several attempts to unite the farmers, and these attempts were often thwarted by the competition between the farmers. One of the farmers on Chongming Island put forward the idea of a central produce distribution centre that would take produce from all the farmers for sending out and also include a farm store. Given the differences in the farmers' practices and the prices of their produce, a central distribution point was an idea that some farmers felt would put them at a disadvantage. The idea never gained traction among the majority of the farmers. There was also an attempt to create a bike trail for tourists to visit the farms on the Island. However, the farmers could not decide who would have priority on the map and have the first slot on the list of farms to visit. The farmer, who suggested the trail was disgusted and exclaimed, "I'm never doing anything for these farmers, again!" The backbiting between the farmers' reflected the competitiveness that they had with each other, and made it that much harder to group them under an overriding ideology for a common endeavour. Furthermore, the majority of farms grew a mixture of rice and produce, and kept some fowl such as chickens or ducks, sometimes both. Thus, there was no way of distinguishing the farms. The fear among the farmers was that if their farm was placed on the end of the map they would lose business to farms that were at the beginning of the map. The problem arose from consumers' lack of awareness of the differences in farming practices that underlie the different prices of farm produce. The differences between the farmers' farming practices was also reflected in their relations with farm labourers and villagers, and it is these relations that I turn to next.

## **Differences in Agricultural Practices and Relations with Farm Labourers and Villagers**

In this section I shed light on how the different backgrounds and agricultural practices of the ecological farmers affects their relationships with villagers and their farm labourers. The ecological farmers' alternative approaches to farming can lead to different relationships with farm labourers and villagers, particularly those who do not have the same farming practices. In a conversation with an ecological farmer, who had a master's degree in ecology, I asked her about the use of integrated pest management techniques such as the use of natural predators. She told me that a lot of this knowledge had been forgotten as peasants have become increasingly reliant on synthetic inputs, as she chuckled about my naiveté to even think that the villagers would still be using these old agricultural methods. For some farmers such as Little Su and Sister Wang the relations can be tense, while for other the relationship is utilitarian. Some ecological farmers such as Old Zhao saw the villagers as a potential source of labour that can be trained to grow produce without synthetic inputs. Some labourers would leave the farms due to disagreements over farming methods.

The alternative practices of farmers would be a bone of contention in relations with farm labourers. One day when I was out on an errand with her I could sense that Big Sister Wang was stressed. I asked her what was wrong, and she told me that a farm labourer responsible for looking after the fowl on the farm including their flock of mallard and free range chickens had left. When I asked her why she told me it was because he had a disagreement with her younger sister about raising the newly hatched chicks. The old labourer wanted to give the chicks antibiotics, but Sister Wang held firm and refused. As a result of this argument the old labourer left because he could not stand seeing the preventable deaths of the chicks. These

differences are indicative of the value of different farming practices that place a premium on certain tasks such as the elimination of “noxious pests such as rabbits and weeds” as Haggerty et al (2009: 772) found in the case New Zealand, as farms embraced productivism in the 1950s. Several studies have shown that high production is an important sign of good farming (Silvasti, 2003; Burton, 2004). This would appear to be the case for conventional farming in peri-urban Shanghai. Thus, the criticism and demands that farmers such as Sister Wang made on workers, who had previously been adherents to conventional farming with the use of synthetic inputs also led to problems finding labourers, never mind keeping them. This tension reflects how changing farming practices challenges workers in a similar way to organic converts (Sutherland, 2013: 438). The additional labour required for ecological farming was a challenge for workers to comply with the requirements of the farmers. This was evident when on a visit to a permaculture farm with Old Yu the farmer complained about how hard it was to find quality labourers, as many labourers would carry out their tasks lackadaisically. Non-use of synthetic inputs was also a challenge, as we saw with Sister Wang’s fowl keeper, who exhibited scepticism about not using antibiotics and left the farm as a result.

Not all of farmers were so critical of farm labourers. Old Zhao openly stated that the way that he ran his farm was akin to a process of subcontracting hiring farm workers from the village to grow produce without the use of synthetic chemicals. “They [the villagers] know how to grow things without synthetic chemicals,” he said. Unlike Sister Wang he did not criticise the methods that the workers used. Old Zhao and Sister Wang’s views of their workers reflects their different approaches to farming. These differences are also reflected in the different prices that they charge for their produce. As we have seen, not all of the ecological farmers held such

fundamental positions about ecological farming with regard to ingredient substitution. Sister Wang holds very strongly to her beliefs about the importance of minimising synthetic inputs in farming, and will not compromise, whereas Old Zhao is much more willing to compromise. Thus, he was willing to contract out farming to local villagers as long as they grow produce without the use of synthetic inputs. Sister Wang's complaints about her farm workers demonstrated differences in how ecological farmers view nature, and reflects their different views of the meanings underlying farm work such as weeding and eliminating insect pests, where their elimination served to demonstrate the triumph of humanity over nature (Burton, 2004: 197). Where farmers such as Sister Wang view nature as a friend, farm workers see nature as full of obstacles that such as weeds that impede the growth of produce and diseases that wipe out chicks. This belief that nature is something to be conquered is also a result of earlier campaigns by the Chinese State such as Mao's War on Nature, which I discussed in Chapter Two. These beliefs were not shared by farmers such as Sister Wang and Little Su, who view nature as being healthful and far less harmful than man made, synthetic chemicals. As Sister Wang often remarked, "It's just a bit of dirt. There's nothing wrong with it! It's far safer than industrial chemicals."

The relationship between farmers and villagers often had underlying tensions arising from the middle-class background of many of the farmers. The issue of money and wealth was never far below the surface in the farmers' and local villagers evaluations of each other. Some farmers were viewed as sources of wealth. For example Stephen the owner of Clear Water Grain Farm was viewed as a source of wealth, as he bought different houses in the village in which the farm was located as guest houses. The village I stayed in the district of Qingpu had an increasing number of people from urban Shanghai, who showed trappings of wealth such as four wheel

drive cars. When I talked to my land lady about Stephen, she would occasionally say, “Tell Stephen that I have a friend with a house for sale, if he’s looking to buy one.” To the local villagers these were wealthy people, almost from another world, and even an opportunity for income. Farmers such as Sister Wang would chafe at this perception. She once complained that the villagers were trying to take advantage of her by asking her for a significant discount on one her ducks. “See, they know their stuff!” she exclaimed indignantly, “That’s why they come to ask me for duck during Chinese New Year. They just want a bargain!”

The ecological farmers were often a source of employment for local villagers, and this could often be tense. As we have seen in our discussion of farm labourers, above. Differing views of what constitutes good farming also frustrate the ecological farmers. Evaluations of good farming are based on shared understandings such as what constitutes a well-tended field (Burton et al, 2008: 23-25), in the case of the ecological farmers evaluation is based on food safety, as reflected by the shared motivation among many ecological farmers to grow safe food without synthetic agricultural chemicals. As I have discussed with the case of Clear Water Grain Farm and Camelia Grove both farms held strong beliefs about ecology and not using synthetic or even mass-produced organic inputs and as a result there was often tension with neighbouring villagers, who did not share those beliefs. The clash of ethics between Little Su and her neighbours was exemplified in our conversation about spraying of crops and how she felt this was undoing the good work that she felt she was doing on the farm. Spraying by neighbours also made it difficult for the farmers to obtain organic certification, as it prevents the ecological farmers from having the necessary buffer zone, as Big Sister Wang pointed out. In many ways the ecological farmers can only control what they do and not the actions of others. The

lack of control that ecological farmers have over the actions of their neighbouring farmers presents challenges in the marketplace, where the ecological farmers interact with consumers and collaborators, as I will show in the remainder of this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

The very act of farming without synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides marks the ecological farmers as distinct from the typical modern farmer in China. The choices that ecological farms make to practice farming without the use of synthetic inputs deviates from the standard practices of yield protection and maximisation. However, even within this group of farmers there are different approaches to farming and different motives for farming. Some farmers such as Sister Wang and Old Zhao are engaging in projects of autonomy from the conventional food system that is rife with food safety concerns. Other farms such as Clear Water Grain Farm have a more altruistic vision, while farms such as Pearl Bay Farm have a more commercial vision. These different visions are often reflected in different practices.

As we have seen in this chapter the different farming practices of the farmers can lead to mutual criticism between the farmers, and also affect how they relate to villagers and farm labourers. The criticism between the farmers themselves, and between the ecological farmers and farm workers not only demonstrates the alternative approaches that the ecological farmers have to farming, but also the way that their working relationships with collaborators is affected by individual beliefs about what constitutes good farming. Returning to the panicked phone call from Big Sister Wang we can see that the differences between Sister Wang and Old Zhao and Pearl Bay Farm reflect the different goals and motivations of the different farmers. Among the farmers there are different practices reflecting different ideas of good



farming from the more commercially pragmatic ecological farming of farmers such as Old Zhao, who are willing to work with different collaborators so long as they meet their brief to farmers such as Sister Wang, who are more concerned with an ideal regarding how farming should be carried out. This is reflected in the inputs they use on their farms. Old Zhao was willing to use government subsidised organic fertiliser, while Sister Wang insisted on getting her fertiliser from a specific, known and trusted source. Neither farmer produced at the same volume as Pearl Bay Farm. Nor are any of these three farms as altruistic in their motives as Clear Water Grain Farm.

Given such fundamental differences in their approaches to farming it is unsurprising that projects such as a bike trail or distribution centre requiring strong working relationships between the farmers did not get off the ground and languished as potential rather than actual opportunities that have been seized. The decision is also indicative of the different ways that the farmers work with collaborators. As we shall see the different practices of the farmers also affects their relationship with non-farmer collaborators in various projects selling their produce.

Furthermore, there was no centralised authority explaining to consumers the difference between the farmers' produce at the market, nor was there anyone with a unifying ideology to rally together the farmers for a common goal. The different farms' approaches to farming, and relations with villagers and labourers reflected their different views of modernity and their willingness to cooperate with different collaborators. However, before we explore this further we first need to understand the city of Shanghai, as it is the market where the farmers sell their produce.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Shanghai: A Place of Opportunity, Collaboration and Friction**

In this chapter I focus on Shanghai as a place where the farmers sell their produce and also as a place where the farmers meet different collaborators. I discuss the attributes of Shanghainese people that make Shanghai a place of opportunities and dilemmas for the farmers and their collaborators. I shed light on attributes that distinguish Shanghai from other cities and how the Shanghainese consumers are different to those in Beijing. These attributes include popular tropes among the Shanghainese themselves such as their feelings of intelligence, cleverness and overall superiority in comparison to outsiders in relation to being modern and having a cosmopolitan outlook, as well as popular stereotypes across China as a whole including the idea of Shanghainese being too commercially minded and being savvy as opposed to gullible (Gamble, 2003). I show how these attributes are a product of the city's history, and the importance of possessing these attributes in order to be viewed positively in Shanghai. I argue that the contestation over attributes such as modernity is the main cause of friction between the different actors in the farmers' markets.

I begin the chapter by elucidating the different districts that make up greater Shanghai, and the demarcation between inner Shanghai and the outer districts of the city. I shed light on how these differences lead to social and spatial alienation between different parts of Shanghai impacts the food system. Next, I discuss Shanghai's history as a commercial centre in China. Established as a market town and then becoming a treaty port, Shanghai has long been regarded as a place for

commerce rather than high culture. This trope continues to the present day in discourses about consumption and the free market in Shanghai, and the selfishness of capitalism. Shanghai has come to be regarded as the place to be to consume goods and services of all kinds and varieties from across the globe that satisfy all manner desires. However, critics argue that Shanghai is a place of shallow consumption with no culture. This is evident in the history of the city, as the alienating aspects of industrial modernisation were countered by a growing labour movement that eventually gave rise to the Chinese Communist Party. I shed light on how Shanghai's history gives rise to the different collaborators who connect together in the endeavour of selling the farmers' produce, and the factors that cause friction between the organisers and farmers at the farmers' market.

Next I chronicle Shanghai's modernisation from the beginning of the treaty port era with the arrival of the first foreigners bringing with them western ideas of modernity and the city's heyday as the Pearl of the Orient. I show that modernity also brought with it problems, evidenced by the nationalist government's response to the decadence of the city and how criticisms of growing socioeconomic inequality in Shanghai made it a base for the communist party. I also show that the urbanity of Shanghai and how many Shanghai residents are alienated from agricultural production in the contemporary era. I show how the diversity of influences that entered China through Shanghai and also spaces to enjoy these influences in the city make it a place where different actors can connect together to promote and sell the farmers' produce, while also giving rise to the frictions between these different actors in the very endeavour in which they are all connected and supposedly united to fulfil.

## **Urban Shanghai and Greater Shanghai: A World of Difference and Why Residents of are alienated from Food Production**

In this section I discuss the division between urban Shanghai and the outer suburbs which are considered rural. This division has led to social alienation between residents of peri-urban Shanghai and residents of inner Shanghai. There are extensive class based spatial divisions within the city, never minding between the city and other parts of greater Shanghai. These divisions affect food safety and also present an opportunity for entrepreneurs to enter the market with a solution or activists to propose and implement an alternative to the disconnection between food producers and consumers.

The disconnection between the rural and the urban is evident in the geographical division of the city (See Figure 2). Jos Gamble's (2003) study of Shanghai's transition from communist, industrial production city to an open, global city focuses on the ten districts of inner Shanghai – Huangpu, Nanshi, Luwan, Jing'an, Xuhui, Changning, Putuo, Hongkou, Zhabei. He notes that these districts are distinct from the four suburban districts Baoshan, Minhang, Jiading and Pudong New Area' and the six suburban counties of Songjiag, Qingpu, Jinshan, Fengxian, Nanhui, and Chongming, which are at the edge of greater Shanghai. Today the suburban districts, in particular Pudong, may not be considered by younger generations to be that remote from inner Shanghai nor of significantly lower status given the new central business district there and also the presence of some of the city's best schools (Non, 2016).

The alienation between the suburban counties and the rest of Shanghai remains today. The alienation is exemplified by the attitude of villagers in areas such as Qingpu toward the suburbs and inner Shanghai. During a period of fieldwork

when I was staying in the Qingpu in a village house rented by one of my informants my land lady would often talk about people going to Shanghai. For example, when I would leave the house to return to the suburb of Minhang where I was staying, my land lady would say, “So, you’re going back to Shanghai”. Even though Qingpu was part of greater Shanghai, she felt that the suburbs and inner Shanghai were a different part of China. Likewise a trip to the suburban counties to visit the farms by consumers from suburbs and inner Shanghai was regarded as a day out to the countryside. Even delivery services that offer free delivery in Shanghai would charge extra to deliver to Chongming.

In the eyes of the residents, Shanghai was separated into different parts - the lower and upper quarters, within the ten inner districts (Gamble, 2003; Non, 2016). Given this division of inner Shanghai the suburban counties may be even more walled off (Gamble, 2003). They also looked different to the inner city with their own taxis that are distinct in appearance from the taxi fleets of inner Shanghai. In the course of my two and a half hour journeys from my apartment in Minhang in the western part of the city to the village I would see changes in the colours of taxis from the recognisable taxi fleets in inner Shanghai that were predominantly made up of Volkswagen Santana 2000 automobiles compared to the older Volkswagen Santana fleet that comprised the local taxi services as I went further away from the city centre. By the time I reached the final stop of the bus trip I would need to find a private car to take me to the village, as there were no taxis in the area. Many of the farmers straddled this spatial divide between urban and peri-urban Shanghai. The farmers often have homes in the suburban districts commuting between these residences and their farms. For example, Sister Wang, had a unit in Nanhui near her farm there and

also another in Minhang. Old Zhao's family also lived in Minhang, while other farmers lived in Pudong.

Some of the farmers were well aware of the social distance between urbanites in first tier cities such as Shanghai and rural food producers, and the opportunity that it presented to ecological farmers. Old Zhao remarked one day, "The market for our produce is limited to big cities like Guangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai, where people are separated from farm production". Old Zhao's remark was based on the idea that urbanites are alienated from food production, which is very much the case with Shanghai due to the divisions between inner city Shanghai, the suburban districts and suburban counties. The alienation between food producers and consumers makes large cities such as Shanghai a desirable market for ecological produce. On the other hand, in less urban places there was less of a need for the ecological farmers' produce, as local consumers would be directly connected to the producers of their food.

The farmers' markets were held across the city in one of the ten inner districts or the area of Pudong, which has become increasingly affluent. The farmers' markets were able to find locations through connections with shopping centres. For example, the main farmers' market where I volunteered was the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market, which was organised by a former environmental activist, Old Yu in conjunction with Big Horizon Plaza. Old Yu was introduced to Big Horizon Plaza by Karen, the founder of the advertising and public relations company that helped Big Horizon Plaza with events and marketing. The plaza was located in an affluent part of Shanghai where some of the city's best schools were located, which in turn drove up the property prices. The plaza was surrounded by several stores that sold produce grown without the use of synthetic inputs such as a Branch of High Quality

Supermarket, which sells produce from their own farm or certified organic food, and a couple of Korean supermarkets selling produce that claimed to have been grown without synthetic inputs.

The sense of superiority among Shanghainese in comparison to people from other parts of China along with the feeling of superiority among urban Shanghainese in comparison to their rural cousins is not new, having been part of local identity since the heyday of the city at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This sense of superiority was enhanced by the rural-urban boundaries created by the Communist government to control the movement of people to the city such as the household registration system known as the *hukou* that registered people to their place of birth (Gamble, 2003: 75). As a result of this system an urban identity became exclusive and desired. Next, I turn to the basis for this sense of superiority – the Shanghainese people's sense of their own intelligence and savvy arising from Shanghai's history as a commercial centre, and the sense of cosmopolitanism and sophistication based on Shanghai's history as the vanguard of modernity in China.

### **A Commercial Centre, a Place to make Money**

In a conversation with a farmer about a possible collaboration between the ecological farmers in Shanghai under the umbrella of an organisation created by an entrepreneur and why they were unwilling to take part in the project the farmer made a point about the nature of people in Shanghai, suggesting that Shanghai seemed to be more commercial than say Beijing. Indeed, the role of commerce in Shanghai is reflected in the way that outsiders identify the Shanghainese and also in the way that the Shanghainese identify themselves. The Shanghainese regard themselves as being shrewd at business (Gamble, 2003: 77). A strong commercial identity distinguishes

the Shanghainese from the peoples of other cities that have farmers' market such as Beijing. This aspect of Shanghainese identity also puts pressure on the farmers to conform to the expectations of collaborators. In order to understand the origins of this Shanghainese identity we must first examine the origin of the city.

The commercial nature of Shanghainese people is not surprising given the reason for the city's existence. Since its founding Shanghai has been a place of trade where people go to earn their fortune. From market town to contemporary business hub, Shanghai has had a long history of commercial enterprise both legal and illegal. Shanghai was officially designated a market town in 1074, and then a market city in 1159. It became the county seat of Shanghai County in 1292 with a population of 200,000 during the Ming Dynasty (Swislocki, 2009: 22). By the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Shanghai had become an important hub in not only the regional economy of Jiangnan (consisting of Shanghai, and the provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu), but of the entire country (Swislocki, 2009: 51). Shanghai would become an increasingly important shipping port when the ban on ocean borne trading was lifted by the Qing rulers in 1684 (Swislocki, 2009: 53). During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century European traders, who were growing increasingly frustrated with being restricted to trading in Guangzhou, would occasionally send missions to the north to renegotiate the trading terms. Indeed, the first attempt by the colonial powers to open up Shanghai as a treaty port was a proposal by the British East India Company in 1756 (Wei, 1987: 17). The foreign powers took a foot hold in Shanghai when a British gunship pulled into the harbour in 1842 and British troops took the city (Johnson, 1995: 179).

Shanghai has been one of major global cities in China since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the arrival of the colonial powers. During this time Shanghai became an important global trading hub, as it was already linked with the country's



interior through internal waterways, and at the mouth of Yangtze delta it was linked to global oceanic trade routes (Swislocki, 2009: 143). A variety of goods passed through the city's ports including exports such as tea, silk and cotton (Johnson, 1995: 211), and imports such as bird's nest from South East Asia and tobacco, paper and knives from Japan (Johnson, 1995: 161).

Shanghai's role as a commercial centre was in contrast to other cities such as Suzhou, which were more exemplary of high culture in the eyes of the literati. The merchants of the market town were still subservient to the mandarins in Beijing and held in low regard, as merchants were regarded as the lowest class of people in the Confucian social hierarchy (Johnson, 1995). The officials of the imperial court disliked the blatant commercialism of Shanghai. Imperial officials were appreciative of the tax revenues, but not comfortable with how this commercialism conflicted with Confucian values (Johnson, 1995). Some merchants were able to buy their way to social respectability by purchasing official positions and became members of the literati. As the two classes that were once poles apart with the scholar-officials at the top and the merchants at the bottom became closer, a new hybrid category of scholar-official/merchant, *shenshang* came into being (Bergere, 2009: 104). The blurring of these lines would continue as the pursuit of commercial profit became increasingly respected in society (Bergere, 2009).

The influence of commercialism on society was not only symbolic, but also manifested itself materially. The main commercial groups in Shanghai were the guilds, which included associations of people from the same parts of China and, more reminiscent of Western terminology, people in the same trade. The guilds played a significant role in shaping the city by building temples, housing for guild members and also providing funding for services such as a fire brigade (Johnson,

1995). The city's transportation and logistical trading networks were also built by the guilds. The trades of commodities such as cotton, silk and fertiliser that were essential to the economy of Shanghai were run by big merchants who were members of the transportation guild (Johnson, 1995: 122).

The city also became a manufacturing hub with naval ship yards, silk weaving factories and cotton mills set up by foreigners (Bergere, 2009: 59). By the Qing Dynasty in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were also supporting handicraft manufacturing industries such as cotton, bamboo, furniture and silk (1995: 16). There were also smaller workshops founded by foreigners using mechanical production methods that were linked to foreign trade including the processing of imported materials such as kerosene. In 1892 the American Trading Company set up a cigarette factory. Tobacco eventually became one of Shanghai's major industries (Bergere, 2009). As well as manufacturing the city also developed a burgeoning high end retail sector by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Shanghai welcomed major department stores such as Wing On and Sincere Department Store, which sold goods from across the world including New York, Paris and London. Customers were pampered by hundreds of well-trained employees (Bergere, 2009: 252).

As it came to power in 1949, the Communist Party realised the productive importance of Shanghai as a production base despite its reservations about the city's hedonistic history (Bergere, 2009). The Communist government redistributed resources, mainly revenues from the city's, at the time, state enterprises to other parts of the country (Bergere, 2009: 307). This would continue into the 1980s after the initiation of the opening up reforms under Deng Xiaoping. Following the opening up reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, Shanghai once again became a destination for foreign investments and expatriates. Betty Wei (1987: 268) notes that

“a great amount of autonomy has been granted for Shanghai to deal with foreigners in trade and investment” with the opening up of the city to foreign investment in 1984. The appointment of Jiang Zemin, who would later become the President of China, to the post of Mayor of Shanghai in 1985 was evidence of this policy direction (Wei, 1987: 265). However, the city was still lagging behind in terms of free market reform, as reforms to state owned enterprises and the development of the private sector were slow (Bergere, 2009: 409). The reforms would accelerate in the 1990s, as the city remained merely a source of tax revenue until the 1990s with Deng’s tour of southern China and his decision to further accelerate the pace of economic reform. By the early 2000s Shanghai was in the midst of a “consumer revolution”. During this time, shops full of merchandise in plazas like those of Hong Kong opened up, along with restaurants serving cuisines from all over the world, night clubs and bakeries (Gamble, 2003). Shanghai was returning to the cosmopolitan glory of its heyday. The shift towards commerce and investment was endorsed by Deng, albeit implicitly, as he encouraged the Shanghainese to look towards the future and grasp the opportunities that had become available to them. The trope of looking forward (*wang qian kan*) was twisted to mean look toward the money during the initial phase of the reform era, as people were more certain about immediately available economic opportunities than the future (Gamble, 2003: 21). The pragmatism of making money continues to be perpetuated in popular discourses about Shanghainese people by the Shanghainese themselves as well as outsiders.

As residents of a commercial centre whose ancestors came to the city to make their fortune, entrepreneurialism and business savvy are qualities that the Shanghainese take pride in. Given this history, the cut and thrust of competition in business is a fact of life in Shanghai and the practicalities of making money are put

ahead of other considerations with a money first ethic being a strong part of Shanghainese identity (Gamble, 2003). The dominance of these qualities over high culture and political power reflect Shanghai's background as a commercial rather than political centre, which is evident in the role of business institutions such as guilds in funding the city's public services. The savviness for which the Shanghainese are renowned also makes it more difficult to earn their trust. In his study of Shanghai Gamble (2003: 77) found that one of the most common stereotypes of Shanghainese people were that they were "smart at doing business". Shanghainese people are proud of their overall savvy in comparison to people from northern China such as Beijingers, who are regarded as being trustworthy and trusting *laoshi*. The perception among the farmers was that Shanghainese consumers were savvy to the point of being excessively distrustful. The farmers would often talk about the trusting nature of northerners as a reason for the relative success of farmers' markets in Beijing in comparison to the challenges that they faced in Shanghai. The haggling and scepticism of Shanghainese was often source of complaints by the farmers. One common complaint was that potential customers were aggressively sceptical about the farmers' claims of their produce being grown without the use of synthetic inputs.

Furthermore, as a commercial centre Shanghai is a place where many people go to seek their fortune. Thus, the city also presents the farmers with many opportunities for commercial collaborations, as there were many entrepreneurs who claimed to have identified lucrative markets for ecological produce. The reputation of Shanghai as a place where people were more business savvy and calculating also made the farmers more sceptical of the intentions of potential commercial collaborators. In the summer of 2015, I met a businessman, Boss Wu who was a

friend of Sister Wang's husband's cousin, Amanda. I accompanied the two of them on several farm visits. The farmers' reactions about the possibility of collaborating with Boss Wu were lukewarm at best. The farmers wondered why someone would want to unite them under a single banner. Their thoughts were often along the lines of, 'If not for commercial gain, then what?' Old Zhao's reaction to the visit was bemusement saying, "I don't even know who this guy is and what he wants." Stephen the owner, of Clear Water Grain Farm, who was also less than keen was more reflective. "He [Boss Wu] seems to be looking for a commercial angle." He continued, "Perhaps we [the farmers] are all more commercial here [in Shanghai]."

I encountered a variety of potential collaborators who approached the farmers including owners of stores that aimed to sell quality food, business men who had access to affluent executives who could be potentially lucrative customers for the farmers and even owners of large farms. Many of these entrepreneurs were also more aware of the market than many of the farmers in terms of the desires of the Shanghainese consumer. These desires are built on modernity, which I turn to next.

### **Paris of the Orient: Modernity and Cosmopolitanism in Shanghai**

Based on the city's reputation as the vanguard of modernity and cosmopolitanism in China, the Shanghainese have long placed great importance on the willingness to be open to new ideas. Gamble (2003: 19) points out that openness to new ideas is often synonymous with being open to 'Western Ideas'. Indeed, as I discussed earlier some definitions of modernity suggest that it arose from the West. However, in recent times the idea of modernity has a broader cosmopolitan bent with receptiveness to ideas emanating from across the world, as Shanghainese compare themselves to their

East Asian peers in Taiwan, Japan and Korea (Gamble, 2003). This is evident in my discussion of the aesthetics of the farmers' markets in Chapter Seven.

Shanghai has been a centre for modernity and cosmopolitanism since the arrival of the colonial powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The foreigners brought with them new technologies including weapons, machinery and new lifestyles. The key to the singularity of Shanghai lay in the rise of *Haipai* as much as it did in the town's economic success and social transformations. Hapai, or "the shanghai style," was the very expression of the commercial cosmopolitan culture of modern China. Initially, the term designated a regional genre of opera, but at the beginning of the twentieth century, it took on a more general sense and was applied as much to the practices of daily life as to forms of literary and artistic expression. The Haipai were often denigrated by the champions of the high Chinese culture, the Confucian scholar-elites, who continued to regard trade as a source of moral degradation and intellectual vulgarity. In their eyes "Haipai represented nothing but a degenerate culture contaminated by foreign influences and subordinated to commercial interests" (Bergere, 2009: 242).

Bergere (2009) suggests that the receptiveness of Shanghainese people to the trappings of North Atlantic modernity was evident in the transliteration of the word "modern" to "*modeng*", which was coined in Shanghai. With the creation of concessions to the western powers, western material culture such as architecture, film and music also entered Shanghai (Swislocki, 2009: 145). Shanghai became a cosmopolitan contact zone (Bergere, 2009; Farrer, 2009; Switzlocki, 2009). The meeting of these ideas gave rise to desires and yearnings for the lifestyle that residents could see and imagine in Shanghai. In Shanghai "a working class girl may dream of swapping her work attire of trousers and jacket for a qipao, while a country

girl could transform herself into a sophisticated, cosmopolitan bar hostess with permed hair, some lipstick and pair of stockings “(Bergere, 2009: 263).

The cosmopolitanism of the city was boosted by the arrival of foreigners, as with them came businesses catering to their needs such as food and wine shops with merchandising from Europe and England from suppliers such as Fortnum and Mason. The Chinese population started going to these shops and gained exposure to these items (Swislocki, 2009: 104). Chinese compradors and courtesans would rely on exposure to such foreign influences to enhance their status in the city (Swislocki, 2009: 105). The Chinese also gained exposure to western food through their interaction with foreigners, albeit mostly through the class barrier of being servants in western households. Some of the Chinese would also visit western restaurants (Swislocki, 2009:106-107). Swislocki writes, “The association of Shanghai with Western food culture cemented Shanghai’s status as the vanguard of China’s engagement with foreign culture” (Swislocki, 2009: 125).

It was not only in consumption of material goods that Shanghai was at the vanguard of modernity in China. In areas such as education and business practices Shanghai was home to a group of people with a different worldview than in other parts of China. By the 1920s a new breed of entrepreneur had risen, and more willing than their predecessors to embrace new methods from the West such as rationalized management, technological innovations and entrepreneurial culture. Many of these families provided their children with overseas education. This was in stark contrast to their predecessors, who staked their social position with the Confucian social hierarchy (Bergere, 2009).

The trappings of North Atlantic modernity also gave rise to criticism from certain quarters, as critics from nationalists, conservative traditionalists and radical

intellectuals argued that such consumption was a sign of colonisation of the mind (Bergere, 2009: 243). The conservative critique was evident in movements such as New Life movement that the Guomindang tried to implement in 1934. The movement, itself, took influences from outside and within China in the forms of fascism and Confucianism, respectively. While the New Life movement claimed to be focused on responding to the social problems that arose from modernity, it seemed more to be an attempt to engender loyalty to the nation and its leader, Chiang Kai-Shek with groups of young fans such as the “Blue Shirts” mobilising the masses to rally behind him (Bergere, 2009: 222). The movement also criticised the hedonistic aspect of the consumer driven modernity emerging in Shanghai, using the medium of radio to broadcast attacks such as, “All day long they won’t do a thing/But deck themselves out in the latest fashions”, to describe “modern girls” (Bergere, 2009: 254). This critique of cosmopolitan consumption was turned on its head and countered with a call to support the nation through the consumption of goods manufacture in China. As Bergere (2009: 256) points out “nationalism and cosmopolitanism were by no means mutually exclusive”.

However, there were genuine problems that came with modernity in Shanghai, as was the case with the rest of the world. Some of the critiques of cosmopolitan consumption were signs of an existing counter narrative to conventional modernity in the face of social problems. Indeed, along with the conventional there also came multiple views of modernity. One of the main social problems arising from conventional modernity was socioeconomic inequality. While a small number lived well in Shanghai enjoying the fruits of the prosperity that came with modernity such as department stores, there were many who worked to provide this prosperity on factory floors that did not live nearly as well. These were true proletariats in the



sense that they were blue collar workers in Shanghai who were on the wrong end of socioeconomic inequality. These problems gave rise to social movements, also with influences from outside China, such as labour, socialist and communist movements. Given Shanghai's status as one of capitals of industrialisation in China, it is not surprising that it was one of the roots of the labour movement (Perry, 1993). The inequality between the world of entrepreneurs and the workers led to resentment. One example was the creation of the Chinese labour party (*gongdang*) that advocated for the formation of trade unions supporting the strikes that broke out in 1912 due to increasing worker consciousness about the inequality surrounding their existence (Bergere, 2009: 139). In the 1920s there were demonstrations against British and Japanese Imperialism. The founding of the Chinese Socialist Party (*Zhongguo shehuidang*) by members of a study group lead by Jiang Kanghu, a scholar who had spent time in Europe and Japan, was also a reaction to socioeconomic inequality in Shanghai during the republican era (Bergere, 2009).

In the high communist era Shanghai was made a production centre under the Communist Party's vision for a communist, industrial modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000). The communists while wary of the city's past as a centre for capitalist modernity also realised its productive potential. After the passing of Mao with the ascent of Deng and his decision to pursue a policy of opening up the economy as well as the country, Shanghai was once again encouraged to regain its former glories. The pace of reform in Shanghai was initially slow with preferences for opening up given to the southern parts of China in particular the city of Shenzhen which is adjacent to Hong Kong, as a result there was some resentment among the populous of Shanghai (Gamble, 2003: Bergere, 2009). It was only in the 1990s that the reforms really took off. Along with these reforms came expectations among the younger generation who came of age or

were born subsequent to the reforms. The young expected to be able to enjoy the fruits of the open market (Gamble, 2003). With the opening up of markets self-presentation based on one's consumption became a market of identity once again, as it was during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Gamble (2003) notes that an increasing number of Shanghainese were interested in the way they dressed and what they owned. I suggest that this also impacts the expectations that the Shanghainese have on other people in terms of presentation, and also on the aesthetics of shopping spaces. As I show in Chapter Seven the emphasis put on self-presentation also affects the farmers.

Shanghai was once again a cultural contact zone as it re-internationalised in the 1990s. Expatriates and migrants such as chefs, as was the case nearly a century prior, once again brought ideas from across the world (Bergere, 2009; Farrer, 2009). The contemporary experience of shopping and selling reflects a return to the city's history of sophistication during its early 20<sup>th</sup> Century heyday in the 1920s and 1930s (Farrer, 2009). With the opening up reforms the customer was once again king in retail. No longer would consumers be subject to surly counter staff in state owned retail stores as they were during the era of high communism (Bergere, 2009). Customers would be treated to well-kept displays and attentive sales staff in retail spaces. Conspicuous consumption would return starting with party cadres and then the new rich, and more recently the new middle-classes (Gamble, 2003). Eating out in restaurants serving a variety of different cuisines has become a form of leisure for the middle-class (Farrer, 2009; Farrer, 2015). The experience of these spaces including the products and also the presentation and displays take inspiration from across the world as global retailers from Europe, North America and other parts of East Asia entered the Shanghai market. As Gamble (2003) notes Shanghai has

always looked to the outside for comparison and the Shanghainese have always felt themselves to be more cosmopolitan than people from other parts of China. Some of the younger farmers talked about ideas of packaging and promotion from Taiwan. As we shall see, these would be the standards that the farmers would be judged on by collaborators. One such collaborator was Andrew the young marketing manager at Big Horizon Plaza.

Some of the farmers' market collaborators such as the shopping centre marketing manager, Andrew, exemplified the new Shanghainese ethos of modernity and the modern Shanghainese. At the age of twenty-six he was already the marketing manager for the shopping centre where the farmers' market was held until January 2015. He was always looking for ways to maximise foot traffic through the shopping centre and optimise the use of space by finding events to hold in the central thoroughfare. One week in December he arranged a car trunk market, an idea he got from looking for new ideas online, which forced the farmers' market to move to the mezzanine floor of the centre – a position that the farmers did not like to be in as I will discuss in Chapter Seven. Knowing that I had volunteered at a farmers' market in Hong Kong and also been a weekly customer at farmers' markets in London, he asked me to meet him on a Sunday to discuss ideas about farmers' markets. He complained to me about having to access google through a virtual private network, as that was where he did most of his searches for inspiration. Andrew's inspirations drew from across the world reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of Shanghai, and the Shanghainese, which Andrew is. As was the case with the cosmopolitan Haipai worldview, Andrew was always keen to try new things. Knowing this I suggested that we meet for dinner at a Mexican restaurant. When I asked him if he enjoyed the food he replied, "It doesn't matter. I just like to try new things."

The farmers were not altogether different from commercial collaborators such as Andrew, as they too had cosmopolitan outlooks and drew inspiration from sources outside of China. As Sister Wang, once shared with me, “I’d like to drive around Europe one day and try all the different delicacies of different cuisines”. Being dissatisfied with the issues of food safety in China the farmers would also draw on agricultural knowledge from Japan and Taiwan for potential solutions to their problems. The difference was their goals, and as Anna Tsing (2005) points out, collaborators need not have the same goals.

### **Friction and Opportunities for Collaboration in Shanghai**

The characteristics of Shanghainese people arising from the city’s history as a commercial centre and as the vanguard of modernity in China presented opportunities for collaboration between producers and sellers of alternative food. The alienation of urbanites in large cities such as Shanghai from their source of food led to a loss of accountability between food producer and consumer, which gave rise to the ecological farmers. The problems of environmental pollution gave rise to environmental activists, who had the goal of protecting the environment such as Clear Water Grain Farm and Old Yu. The reputation of Shanghai as a place of commerce can be seen in the number of commercial collaborators, who see ecological produce as a financially lucrative market.

Sometimes the different parties can meet to collaborate on projects such as farmers’ markets. However, such collaborations are also fraught with tension between the altruistic activists and the profit motive of commercial actors. This tension is a reflection of the different motivations of the different collaborators who are present in Shanghai including those who are commercially driven such as

marketers who adhere to conventional modernity and activists who are motivated by an altruistic desire to solve certain problems with conventional modernity such as environmental pollution. These differences would eventually give rise to frictions that would fracture the delicate working relationship between the farmers, activists and commercial collaborators.

The reputation of the Shanghainese people for commercialism meant that there were plenty of collaborators in Shanghai, who saw the lucrative potential of ecological produce. While the farmers would agree that profitability is important, I suggest that they are trying to create a social world that is about more than economic exchange, a position that is more in line with the vision of activist collaborators. As we shall see, the power in the relations when it comes to the rights to sell the farmers' produce is complex and positions of power fluctuate. Sometimes the activists will have power when commercial interests see an opportunity to profit from their causes such as selling ecological food.

Commercial collaborators would be bemused by the unwillingness of farmers such as Old Zhao to scale up their operations. One collaborator remarked, "What are they going to do, enjoy the fruits of slow life?" Such collaborators wished to scale up the farms in order to better profit from ecological produce. The farmers were often less interested in scaling up their farms. Old Zhao would often say, "I only need about one hundred customers. That will be enough for me". This difference in goals led Old Zhao to question the motives of such collaborators. There are also activists who seek to change the world through the promotion of small farmers who grow produce without synthetic inputs such as Old Yu. These different collaborators with different motives are brought together in Shanghai in the enterprise of promoting and

selling the farmers' produce because there is a genuine demand and some would feel a need for such produce in Shanghai, as Old Zhao pointed out.

The cosmopolitan outlook of the Shanghainese also allows for ideas from across the globe to diffuse into the city and inspire the farmers, commercial collaborators and activist collaborators. This is exemplified by Andrew the shopping centre marketing manager, who draws inspiration through internet searches and is willing to try new things in terms of his personal consumption as well as new ideas for his work. This sophistication is also a form of hegemony governing the conduct of the farmers at the farmers' market at venues such as Big Horizon Plaza, which I discuss in Chapter Seven. Their ability or inability to fit into the vision of modernity that collaborators have and demonstrate that they follow the ethic of commercial collaborators such as Boss Wu and Andrew leaves the farmers open to criticism from these commercial collaborators.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen the attributes of the Shanghainese as cosmopolitan, modern people who are shrewd at business and obsessed with self-presentation are rooted in the city's history. The commercial ethic of the Shanghainese can be traced to Shanghai's beginnings as a trading port. The trope of commercialism was further reinforced during the treaty port era, as people from all over China and from the various colonial powers flowed into Shanghai to seek their fortune. The trope of Shanghai as a vanguard of modernity can be traced back to the arrival of foreigners along with their beliefs and ideas. These attributes have given rise to the ecological farmers and their collaborators, and also shaped their experiences.

With the passing of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping's rise to power came subsequent economic reforms that opened up markets once more. Industrialised, free market North Atlantic modernity has once again become the dominant model of human progress in Shanghai, and the people in urban Shanghai are well aware of this. Furthermore, as urbanites they have certain views of what constitutes modernity including sophistication based on a certain aesthetic influenced by ideas from across the world. These ideas were a source of inspiration for events that businesses and marketing collaborators such as Andrew wished to create that would attract middle-class customers, who pursue new fashions with relish. As we shall see these ideas would also sometimes be in conflict with the farmers, as the farmers had left behind urban lives for a more rustic life less reliant on the aesthetics that collaborators such as Andrew deem to be sophisticated.

The alienation of inner Shanghai from peri-urban Shanghai and other parts of China socially and spatially has also alienated consumers from food producers. This disconnection has led to concerns about food safety, which has been one of the motivations for the ecological farmers to return to the land. However, in returning to the land they have also become somewhat alienated from urban Shanghai and this is reflected in their relations with some of their collaborators in the city. Even though farmers such as Sister Wang have a similarly cosmopolitan outlook to commercial collaborators such as Andrew, the farmers were also viewed as a breed apart by these urbane collaborators due to their abandonment of the trappings of conventional modernity. This is exemplified by the critique of the farmers' lack of desire to scale up and increase the efficiency of their production by commercial collaborators.

In a city such as Shanghai, entrepreneurs with their goals of commercial success can meet and work with activists with the altruistic goal of environmental

protection to sell ecological produce. The farmers' themselves affected by food safety issues arising from the alienation of urban consumers from rural food producers including those from peri-urban Shanghai return to the land in rural Shanghai to grow their own produce. Shanghai is a place where all these collaborators with different agendas can meet to offer solutions to the problems of food safety arising from social and spatial distance between food producers and consumers.

In this thesis I present cases of people who hold positive and negative beliefs in conventional modernity, people who are commercial and people who avoid commercialism come together to collaborate. Cosmopolitan collaborators influenced by the conventional modernity drawing inspiration from the outside world seek new ways to fulfil the desires of self-presentation of consumers through alluring displays. The farmers need to meet the standards set by commercial collaborators such as Andrew in order to have a good working relationship with them. Conversely, with movements come counter movements, and the Shanghainese people's drive to conventional modernity has also been accompanied by movements that have been critical of conventional modernity such as the labour movements that eventually gave rise to a solid base for the Communist Party. The problems of conventional modernity such as food safety are more acutely felt in epicentres of modernity such as Shanghai and movements arising from these problems are also more prevalent. Activists such as Old Yu realise the problems with conventional modernity. They believe that the problems of the food system stem from problems of modernity and strive to create an alternative. As I will show, the farmers navigate the challenges of working with both sides selecting the side that benefits them the most.



## **Chapter Five**

### **Building Trust and Customer Relations in Farmers' Markets in an era of Increasing Consumer Criticism**

On any given day at the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market there would always be sceptical members of the public who were wary of the produce that the farmers were selling. They would either look apprehensively with expressions that suggested that they were bracing for a pitch from the farmers that they did not want or they would mumble something to their companions. Some passers-by would mumble remarks such as, "It's probably GMO (Genetically Modified Organism)." The reaction of these consumers were indicative of the apprehension that the public had towards the farmers and their produce. How could farmers overcome the apprehension of consumers and convert them into customers? They did not have certification, nor were they part of a larger organisation that had the confidence of consumers such as British consumers' trust in supermarkets (Kjaernes et al, 2013). They were atomised small businesses that many Chinese consumers were most dubious of (Veeck et al, 2010).

The ecological farmers and their customers supposedly share an interest in safe food that is grown without the use of synthetic chemicals, which should be the basis for building a mutually beneficial relationship. The farmers grow food that meets the customers' demand for safe food and at the same time, seek to establish a relationship with their customers other than the utilitarian relationships built on exchange in the marketplace. They seek to build an alternative social world that is based on appreciation for ecological produce. They aspire to a relationship with customers that is built on mutual respect, whereby customers respect the efforts that

the farmers have made to grow their produce without the use of synthetic inputs and the farmers respect customers for making the decision to pay the higher prices for their produce. Their goal of the markets is to convert passers-by from strangers who have nothing to do with the ecological farmers into regulars who know the farmers well (Gronow, 2004: 47-48).

However, there is a significant obstacle to bringing this relationship to fruition, as potential customers may not believe what the farmers are saying. In this chapter I discuss the strategies that the ecological farmers use to gain the trust of potential customers in spite of the declining levels of trust in the Chinese food system. Believing the ecological farmers' claims regarding their produce being grown without agricultural chemicals "entails the expectations that others [namely the farmers] will meet their obligations and responsibilities" (Miształ, 1996: 68). Consumer concerns about being fleeced in markets is not new in China, as merchants have long been under weighing goods or selling goods of dubious quality (Hanser, 2008). The lack of trust in not being cheated is a result of food safety scandals where producers have been caught cheating consumers (Ludeneva, 2004; Yan, 2012). Sceptical consumers were often unsure whether the ecological farmers would cheat them or not, and some were even be too wary to engage with the farmers.

In their study of trust in food in Europe Kjaernes, Harvey and Warde (2013) distinguish between trust in institutions such as contracts and legislation, and interpersonal trust between suppliers and consumers. They note that there are two types of trust. The first is confidence based on belief in the functioning of formal institutions. The second is familiarity based on personal relations and knowledge. Kjaernes et al (2013: 198) point out, "Familiarity relies on long-term personalized, experience-based and particular relations that involve knowledge of... particular

persons, and specific knowledge of the origins and qualities of the food.” Given that the farmers do not have organic certification, relationships based on personal experience and knowledge are the type of relationship that the ecological farmers are seeking to form with consumers. The ecological farmers wish for consumers to be familiar with the growing practices that they use to allay their concerns about food safety. As we have seen in Chapter Three, lack of trust in the food system is the reason why farmers such as Old Zhao and Sister Wang gave up their lives in the city to return to the land and farm in the first place. One of the main questions I answer in this chapter, is how farmers go about breaking the ice, to arrive at a point where consumers passing through the farmers’ market are willing to familiarise themselves with the farmers to form a relationship of trust.

Farmers can earn trust by disclosing their growing practices and beliefs to consumers at farmers’ markets where consumers and producers come into direct contact (Moore, 2006: 425). Oliver Moore (2006) covers trust and consumer sentiments, but only among those who buy at the farmers’ markets. The problem for ecological farmers is their inability to attract consumers to reach the point of interacting with the producer. The farmers’ goal at the farmers’ market was to convert people who walk by without looking or look apprehensively at their stalls into customers by increasing the familiarity of consumers with the qualities of their produce and how the produce is grown, and therefore become trustworthy in the eyes of potential customers so as to warrant their custom. The tactics that the farmers use to achieve this goal include free samples, brochures to inform and educate people about how they grow their produce, as well as open invitations to make farm visits.

The farmers not only aspire to overcome the lack of trust among potential customers and convert them into customers, but also wish to have social relations

with them that are built on genuine sentiments. Here, I use Avron Offer's (1997) idea of the economy of regard. He writes, "The economy of regard operates wherever incentives are affected by personal relations" (Offer, 1997: 471). For example, parties in a transaction may agree to suboptimal production or exchange such as a price that is lower than the seller would want thanks to a mutual reciprocity between the two parties, which is an alternative to the narrow parameter of utility in conventional economic relations. Claire Hinrichs (2000: 296) gives the example of farmers rounding the weight of produce in farmers' markets. I expand on these ideas and suggest that loyal customers are willing to pay a higher price for ecological produce, as they have a genuine appreciation for the farmers' efforts. Roger Lee (2000: 319) notes in his study of plant nurseries that sellers offer time, information and expertise in transactions. One of the main sources of value of ecological produce is the agricultural knowledge that informs the farmers' farming practices, which is the very quality that makes their produce safe, and according to their supporters, more flavourful and worth the higher prices. The question is how farmers such as Sister Wang persuade people who are browsing and passers-by at the farmers' market of the truth behind her claims in the face of widespread distrust among consumers in China.

In the remainder of the chapter I first discuss the wariness and distrust among consumers in China. Next, I shed light on the tactics that the ecological farmers use to gain the trust of potential customers using techniques such as building rapport with consumers, introducing their farms through brochures as well as free samples and farm visits. I then elucidate the farmers' aspirations to build social rather than transactional relationships with potential customers in order to gain their trust.

## **Distrust in the Food System among Consumers in Contemporary China**

In this section I discuss the issues that cause consumers not to trust the ecological farmers and how the farmers respond to this lack of trust. These issues include disbelief in the farmers' claims about their production methods and the farmers' lack of organic certification. In his study of food safety in China, Yan Yunxiang notes that as well as physical risk, food safety scares can also lead to erosion of trust across society (2012: 720). While Yan (2012) argues that this distrust is symptomatic of China's transition from a society based on personal relations to one based on transactional relations, I suggest that this distrust is precisely a function of a food system that is being increasingly based on transactional relationships, and as a solution to this alienation, alternative food movements such as farmers' markets and organic food cooperatives seek to restore personal relations into the food system (Goodman et al, 2012; Luetchford and Pratt, 2011). The increasing emphasis on interpersonal trust is evident in Jakob Klein's study of food safety practices in Kunming, where he found that his interlocutors who shopped in the markets would rely on their relations with vendors and buy from familiar vendors, who they felt they could trust to sell them "good quality, fresh vegetables" (2013: 387).

In a market where producers are willing to take any number of short cuts at the expense of consumers to increase their profits from replacing ingredients to excessive use of synthetic inputs to increase yields, consumer wariness and scepticism was not unjustified (Yan, 2012, 2015). Wang et al note that food safety ranks "among the top concerns of Chinese consumers" in polls conducted in the last decade (2007: 27). The lack of trust in the contemporary food system in China has led to increase demand for ecological food, which have been produced without the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers. However, the challenges in

converting to certified organic food production can leave many foods that are grown in accordance with organic principles without organic certification, as is the case with the ecological farmers.

The ecological farms are not regulated by the state and are not certified organic, so there was no code of practice or standards to explain the diversity of practices and variation in the offering from farmers, especially regarding their different farming practices. In the case of a farmer like Old Zhao who operates in a green food growing zone his non-use of synthetic inputs already puts him beyond the minimum requirements of the area. This is also the case for all the ecological farmers. They are in practice going above and beyond what is required by law, but at the same time not doing enough to get organic certification, as none of them have a buffer zone to shield them from any harmful effects of synthetic input use on neighbouring farms. Several farmers have told me that, “we’re too small for the state [*zhengfu*] to worry about.” Since these farmers did not operate with a buffer zone from conventional farmers, applying for organic certification was therefore not an option. On one visit to Sister Wang’s farm I was taking a walk around the block with Big Sister Wang when she said, “I can smell the pesticide in the air.” Moments later we saw an old lady with a plastic tank on her back that had a tube leading to a nozzle. “See I told you.” She later admitted that it had been their mistake for not finding a piece of land with a buffer zone. “It’s our fault, really. We should have found a larger block of land with room for a buffer zone,” Big Sister Wang said somewhat ruefully. Thus, the ecological farmers cannot claim the same legitimacy as certified organic food in the market place.

The lack of organic certification or any sort of third party verification exposes the farmers to criticism from sceptical consumers. However, the farmers themselves

are often more than willing to call into question the legitimacy of organic certification in rebuttal to such sceptics. The farmers and farmers' market organisers feel that they were more authentic, as they were willing to engage directly with consumers rather than through a sheet of paper or a certification label. As one farmer remarked to me once, "A consumer came and questioned us about our lack of certification, and I asked them 'what makes certification label worth the paper that it's printed on?'" At the same time it also makes it hard for consumers to tell which claims are legitimate or not and how one farmers' practices differ from another, as it has not been verified by a third party. Niklas Luhman points out that "symbols represent the distinction between familiar and unfamiliar within the familiar world. They are forms of self-reference using the self-reference of form" (1988: 96). In the eyes of some consumers the familiarity of organic certification denotes food that can be trusted to have been grown without synthetic inputs. By not having certification the ecological farmers are missing this recognised symbol among potential customers that their produce is indeed safe. Given that the farmers are not certified, sceptical consumers would often question the veracity of the farmers' claims that their produce was grown without the use of synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. In fact, some sceptical consumers believed that it was impossible to grow food without synthetic chemicals or pesticides. This was exemplified by a conversation I overheard between a man enquiring about black beans and the farmer who grew the beans using permaculture methods.

*Man: Impossible! You can't grow black beans without fertilisers or chemicals. All the pests and illnesses would ruin your crop.*

*Farmer: What about 50 years ago before most farms used chemicals and fertilisers?*

*Man: No way! I've farmed. Have you actually farmed?*

*Farmer: Yes! For five years. Then we'll have to agree to disagree.*

However, there were also consumers that did not trust certification, being aware that there have been instances where produce that had organic certification turned out to have synthetic inputs (See Thiers, 2005). Indeed on an occasion on Sister Wang's farm I spoke to a visitor about the issue of certification and trust and asked her about her thoughts on organic certification in China. She replied, "You can't tell whether the labels are real, either." This view is evident in surveys of consumers regarding food safety and their perceptions of organic food in China. Siriex et al found that many of their respondents were worried about chemicals in food when asked about conventionally produced food (2011: 674). They also found that a few of the consumers did not believe that organic food was "100% natural" and free of chemicals (2011: 675). In their survey of consumer intentions to purchase organic food, Chen and Lobo found that considerable confusion amongst Chinese consumers with recent food scandals had eroded their confidence in the credibility of organic food (2012: 303).

Many of the farmers agreed with the perspective that organic certification was overrated as a guarantee of quality. A farmer recalled an argument that he had with a consumer. "I asked the customer, 'What makes you believe that the produce you buy in the supermarket is organic, other than the piece of paper [the organic label?]' " Old Yu pointed out to me that what most consumers want is somebody to blame if something goes wrong, as it gives a degree of traceability and means that the produce has been underwritten by a third party. "Certification just means that someone is liable if something goes wrong," he said. It was not hard to understand



the wariness of consumers in Shanghai given the sheer number of food scandals from tainted milk powder to 40 year old meat to fake eggs.

Small farmers are feared because consumers worry that they were fly-by-nighters, who will not be accountable for anything that goes wrong. Consumers are uncertain about the ability of farmers to uphold their side of the bargain and sell food that is actually grown without the use of synthetic inputs (Kjaernes et al, 2013).

Veeck et al (2010: 228) note that many of the participants in their study of food shopping in Nanjing in 2010 were wary of private companies, which they perceived to be mainly motivated by profit. Similarly, some consumers felt that the farmers were fleecing them trying to pass off produce that was of a lesser quality such as smaller eggs or genetically modified legumes as being wholesome and natural. A farmer told me that a customer called them after hearing about people being sold rotting meat, and asked them if they were selling rotting meat. The farmer was astounded. “If that’s what they think they shouldn’t buy from us.” However, it is difficult to blame consumers in an environment where the tags for produce such as place of origin can be faked. There was an occasion when I was at a farmers market, where a customer looking at some watermelons asked, “they *are* actually from Chongming, aren’t they? They’re not from Nanhui.”

“No, no, they’re from our own farm in Chongming,” the farmer replied. Given such dysfunction in the food system in China it is hard to blame consumers for their wariness and protecting their own interests.

Concerns about the bona fides of the farmers’ claims were not just held by consumers, but also organisers of farmers markets such as venue managers like Andrew. He once shared with me, “my biggest fear is that the farmers’ produce is not actually synthetic chemical free”. The concern was that the farmers would not be

accountable if something goes wrong, and that Old Yu, the person responsible for bringing the farmers together had little power to control the farmers and hold them accountable were such an event to occur. Indeed, after Our Piece of Ground's relationship with Big Horizon Plaza ended, Old Yu tried to overcome this problem by taking a bond of RMB5000 per year as a form of insurance, as part of a set of reforms for the new location of the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market at Altitude Art Centre. If anything went wrong with the food, Our Piece of Ground would take a part of the bond. This addressed the concerns about accountability and liability, which a potential collaborator with the farmers made when he raised the question of "Who's liable when things go wrong? Who pays up?" in a meeting I had with him. The bond was a preparation for this very scenario. However, at the end many of the farmers did not pay the bond and the idea was eventually abandoned for reasons that I will discuss in Chapter Eight.

Consumer wariness was a challenge that all the farmers faced on a weekly, if not daily basis, as they struggled to gain the trust of consumers and persuade them of the legitimacy of their farming practices. The cold reality of a depersonalised open market built on transactional relations fostered the need for certification, which was a leap of faith in the effectiveness of institutions enforcing the certification. Old Yu felt that certification was just a way for consumers to have an agency to hold liable for problems with the quality of food. If food was found to have high levels of synthetic chemicals, the certification agency would be liable. However, this alienated system that distanced them from the source of their food did not sit well with some consumers. For these consumers and the ecological farmers in particular, this was not enough. They preferred more personal relations. The building of personal relations and familiarisation of consumers with their agricultural practices would allow

ecological farmers to legitimise their claims as a trustworthy alternative to conventional food and food with organic certification.

### **Just the Right Amount of Charm: Rapport Building in Farmers' Markets**

In order to reach passers-by, farmers needed to engage their attention by using charm and persuasion. The main technique that farmers use to break the ice and initiate relationships with potential customers is rapport building. Building rapport with customers would eventually lead to friendships that would allow the farmers to form personal rather than merely transactional relations with consumers. The place where this is most often practiced is at the point of sale in the farmers' markets. This would not be possible if the farmers were not present at the market. This was why many organisers of farmers' markets like Old Yu were adamant that the farmers themselves needed to be at the market. Unlike Old Yu commercial collaborators such as Andrew who felt that ecological food was another choice in the open market to be packaged, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Seven. Andrew suggested that the farmers' market could have a stall in Big Horizon Plaza throughout the week, which he would staff with college students, and the farmers would not need to go to Big Horizon Plaza. This arrangement would defeat the purpose of farmers' forming social relations with consumers and the experience would be no different to that of shopping at a supermarket, which was what Andrew was aiming for, as he made this remark when we were strolling through a branch of the upmarket Ole supermarket. He said, "See? The staff here are mostly university students."

Building rapport with consumers was quite a challenge, as consumers were often wary of forming a rapport with farmers. They seemed to have a fear of the obligation that came with forming a rapport with farmers, which obligate them to

purchase produce from the farmer. Where Sister Wang was able to convey her passion for her produce, her older sister was charming, but also straight forward. In other words she was charming without being too smooth. Being originally from Shanxi province in North Western China, Big Sister Wang was able to embody the northern Chinese quality of being *laoshi*. She would often cajole parents or grandparents with young children or infants to come and try her produce with her charm. Big Sister Wang's charm added to the impact of the free samples she offered at farmers' markets, as without charm, consumers would walk by the stall without noticing the farmers. For example, even though Big Sister Wang had gotten past the gatekeeper of the gated community, the estate management in a market that a few of the farmers organised themselves, she still had to use these tactics to charm the local population and build personal relationships.

Big Sister Wang was charming and accommodating to outsiders in a way that was almost the diametric opposite of her younger sister, who was often uncompromising in her ideals and position even towards customers. She was a competitor whose abilities other less charismatic farmers were well aware of. One day while we were at Crystal Bay Mansions, when Big Sister Wang was delayed, I remarked to Old Zhao, "You're doing pretty well today."

"That's because Big Sister Wang isn't here yet," he replied.

Old Zhao's produce was notably cheaper than Wang sisters' produce at an average of RMB8 per catty as opposed to RMB15 per catty, almost double Old Zhao's prices. So one would assume that most consumers would be attracted to Old Zhao's produce, especially given Shanghainese peoples' reputation for being savvy at business. Instead, there was no notable difference in patronage between these two farmers selling fruits and vegetables at Crystal Bay Mansions. There were just as many

customers buying from each farmer. This was indicative of Old Zhao's understanding of Big Sister Wang's abilities. Old Zhao was not the only person at the market to notice Big Sister Wang's ability. A Guo, who had worked for various retail companies before going into ecological farming was also aware of it. One day when we were discussing sales and marketing, I said, "My impression is that Clear Water Grain Farm is not selling well at the market."

"They're not selling properly. If they gave their produce to someone like Big Sister Wang to sell it would sell well," he replied.

The ice breaker that Big Sister Wang most commonly used to entice passers-by was complimentary ways of addressing consumers such as *mei nu*, pretty lady or beauty for young ladies (usually under 40), *ayi* auntie for women over 50, *xuai ge* handsome for young men, and for older men *shushu*, uncle, or *baobei* for babies and young children. The young were complimented, while the older customers were given respectful forms of address. Another of Big Sister Wang's communication techniques was her delivery, which was charming, but also down to earth rather than polished, so consumers would appreciate her rapport without feeling that they were being primed for a sale. She was also more active in her engagement with passers-by than many of the other farmers, who would wait for customers to come over to their stalls. Big Sister Wang would take more initiative and call out to customers. She took pride in her ability to be considered an experienced friend rather than someone who was nosing around other peoples' lives. According to James Kirwan (2006: 309), consumers were willing to suspend their "understanding of commercial realities in order to facilitate bucolic exchanges". However, I suggest that such exchanges are not regarded as particularly exceptional in China, as many people still shop at wet markets where they interact with stall holders in the way that Kirwan describes.

Complements made out of politeness and etiquette are a part of the repertoire for touts. Therefore, it was important for Big Sister Wang to avoid pseudo-regard by projecting the image of a friendly older colleague or neighbouring auntie. She was proud of this ability, as she shared with me her rapport with younger colleagues in her work unit (*danwei*), where she was on indefinite leave, but still visited occasionally to see her old colleagues. She said, “My colleagues either think of me as an older sister or a kindly auntie”. Big Sister Wang used the very same charm that helped her to cultivate the bond of fictive kinship in her work unit with colleagues to great effect to form bonds with consumers who would become loyal customers. Achieving this level of rapport creates familiarity that allows the consumer to trust Big Sister Wang in the same way they would a familiar vendor (Kjaernes et al, 2013). Big Sister Wang managed to achieve the right amount of regard for potential customers without their feeling that her regard was a ruse to profit from them. Her ability to play the role of the friendly auntie suggests to potential customers that she has their interests at heart rather than mere economic gain from the transaction. However, sometimes interactions at the market would not be enough to earn the trust of potential customers.

### **Introducing the Farm to Consumers: Flyers, Scrap Books and Farm Visits**

Rapport at the market may not be enough for potential customers to become regulars. Knowing the limits of rapport at the market, some of the farmers would also take the time to inform passing consumers about their growing practices. The farmers would prepare either pamphlets, fact sheets or scrap books with photographs of the farms and their produce. The farmers would all have information about their farms and farming methods to show potential customers at the farmers’ markets with the aim of

explaining how their produce was grown and illustrating their farming methods. For example, a free range chicken farm, Heavenly Love would have a scrap book with photos of their farm and their flock of chickens. They would explain their farming methods and how their chicken coup does not smell.

Camelia Groves' flyer, with one side in Chinese and other in English, explains the methods that she used to grow her rice using a flock of mallard to peck at weeds and pests while fertilising the fields at the same time. The following is the text from the English side:

*Camelia Grove was founded in 2011, and consists of two farms, one in Nahui and another on Chongming Island. Our farm in Nahui is 19.4 mu, and mainly produces fruits and vegetables. The orchard also has ducks [chickens, actually]. Our farm on Chongming Island grows rice and we keep ducks in the rice fields.*

*The rice grown at Camelia GroveCamelia Grove is a product of a natural nutrient cycle. After three years of experimentation our farm [on Chongming] is now able to grow a variety of fruits, vegetables and other produce without the use of synthetic chemicals. Weeding is carried out with our labour. The result is an increase in the quality of the land and soil.*

*Our ducks are a product of our farm's irrigation system, developed in 2013. The ducks eliminate pests and are a source of natural fertiliser for our crops, while the irrigation waterways give the ducks space to roam and insect pests provide an excellent source of food for the ducks. Rice grown in this natural nutrient cycle and*

*the texture is far superior to rice that has been grown using synthetic fertiliser and pesticides.*

*The rice produce at Camelia Grove includes: white rice, brown rice and black rice. The rice in the photographs is packed in 2 catty (1KG) and 4 Catty (2.5KG) packs. Black rice needs to be vacuum packed, while white rice and brown rice does not need to be vacuum packed in dry areas. Each of our 10 Catty gift packs includes 5 x 2 catty vacuum packs. We can provide 50 Catty bags or 20 Catty bags of rice by request, as vacuum packing is not necessary if the rice is consumed quickly and not kept too long.*

Old Zhao's brochure was a folded pamphlet which does not feature his ethos as much but instead, featured lists of the produce that customers can expect at different times of year:

*January: Burclover, Mountain Yam, Spinach, Broccoli, Purple Yams, Amaranth, cabbage*

*February: Spinach, Mountain Yam, Yams, Napa Cabbage, Purple Yams, amaranth*

*March: Burclover, Celery, Turnip Shoots, Celtuce*

*April: Beets, Turnip Shoots, Garlic Chives, Celtuce, Amaranth, Garlic Chives*

*May: Potatoes, Morning Glory, Broad Beans, Garlic Chives, Peas, Turnip Shoots, Asparagus*



*June: Potatoes, Soy Beans/Edamame, Morning Glory, Peas,  
Turnip Shoots, Garlic Chives, Asparagus*

*July: Winter Melon, Fresh Peanuts, Fresh Corn, Turnip Shoots,  
Asparagus*

*August: Winter Melon, Watermelon, Pumpkin, Fresh Peanuts,  
Fresh Corn, Loofah, Asparagus, Black-eyed Pea Shoots*

*September: Yams, Soy Beans, Peanuts, Fresh Lentils, Lentils  
(Red/White)*

*October: Pumpkin, Mountain Yam, Spaghetti Squash, Soy  
Beans/Edamame, Lentils (Red/White)*

*November: Yams, Mountain Yam, Cauliflower, Bok Choy, Broccoli,  
Sweet Potatoes*

*December: Bok Choy, Mountain Yams, Daikon, Spinach, Napa  
Cabbage, Amaranth, leeks*

The different produce indicated freshness and also a genuine offer to consumers.

He also had a price list for different delivery boxes listed including:

*One monthly subscription RMB400 for eight deliveries of 3KG of  
produce with 3-4 varieties.*

*Quarterly Subscription RMB1200 for 25 deliveries of 3KG of  
produce with 3-4 varieties.*

*Half year subscription RMB2400 for 50 deliveries of 3KG of  
produce with 3-4 varieties.*

*One Year Subscription RMB4800 for 100 deliveries of 3KG of  
produce with 3-4 varieties.*

Both brochures had the address of the farm. While Old Zhao's had a map of where the farm was, the Wang Sisters' flyer did not have any maps. Camelia Grove's flyer had their ethos as the focus and pictures of their produce, while Old Zhao's was more utilitarian, reflecting their different world views, which I discussed in Chapter Three.

The majority of the ecological farmers at the farmers' market would invite and welcome visitors to their farms so that they could have a better understanding of the ecological farmers' farming practices and therefore build trust with these potential customers. Their standard pitch to consumers at the farmers' market would be to talk about their practices like non-use of synthetic inputs "*women bu yong huafei nongyao* (we don't use synthetic fertilisers or agricultural chemicals)". This would be followed by an invitation to visit the farm and see for themselves "*ni keyi lai women nongchang wan* (you can come to our farm and play)", with the implicit understanding that the potential visitor can also see for themselves what things are like on the farm and how the farmers' produce is grown, and if the visitors are convinced they then become customers of the farmer. The farmers would then hand the potential customer a brochure or a printed sheet of paper with instructions on how to get to the farm. By the same token, for consumers knowing where their food comes from was the most important reason for making a farm visit. The farmers' main emphasis was on having people visit their farms to see for themselves how the produce is grown and ideally to satisfy these potential customers that they were trustworthy.

To that end, Our Piece of Ground as a group not only organises farmers' markets but also farm visits. During my time in the field, Old Yu organised four farm

visits – to Camelia Grove in Chongming, Pearl Bay Farm closer to the city, Clear Water Grain Farm in the West and another to Mileage Poultry also in the West of Shanghai. The visit to Pearl Bay Farm was the most patronised farm visit with thirty guests including children. The majority of the visitors were members of the Shanghai Vegetable Cooperative – *Shanghai Caituan*, a purchasing cooperative that Old Yu helped to found before his involvement with Our Piece of Ground farmers' market. The cooperative mainly consisted of middle-class mothers. Many were loyal customers of the farmers, and already had a rapport with them through the cooperative. The tour to Mileage Poultry farm had thirteen people including children and was composed of a group of middle-class families from central Shanghai, who used to patronise Old Yu's previous farmers' market in its initial location before it moved to Big Horizon Plaza.

Farm visits were also an opportunity for customers to get their hands dirty in the fields or with other farm chores to secure the freshest produce. It was standard practice for farmers to invite visitors to the fields to harvest their own produce to take home with them. At a farm visit to Camelia Grove by an important Japanese customer and a couple of his friends in the local Japanese community, the group arrived by bus from Pudong and proceeded to the farm. Once they arrived Sister Wang showed them around the farm, after which they had a lunch of produce picked from the farm, mallard soup and rice. Afterwards, the visitors slaughtered their own ducks to take home with them.

The goal of farm visits was for the farmer to show consumers the way they grew their produce and kept their livestock. This in turn would lead to return purchases and positive word of mouth, with the potential of building a close social relationship with the customer based on mutual respect rather than the impersonal,

transactional relationship of the market. Many farmers aimed to create loyal customers like these, or fans, *fensi*, as they were called. These fans were a boon for the credibility of the farmers, as they were effective endorsers of ecological produce who could provide an independent source of verification for the legitimacy of the farmers' claims about their farming practices. One day in late August when I was watching Sister Wang man her stall at a farmers' market, a lady came up to the stall. "You cheated me!" She exclaimed. "Those eggs you sold me were not duck eggs. They were chicken eggs. My family told me when I took them home. Look they're so small!" Sister Wang told the disquieted lady that the eggs were indeed duck eggs, but that they were smaller because they came from wild mallard ducks, as opposed to a domestic variety. The lady remained unconvinced. There was a regular customer of Sister Wang's next to the lady making the complaints. She said, "No, no those are duck eggs. I've been to the farm and seen the ducks and the eggs. Their ducks are different, so the eggs are smaller". I enquired with Sister Wang about this customer and she told me that the customer became a loyal customer after visiting her farm, buying all her produce from Sister Wang.

This is not to say that farm visits were beyond consumer scepticism. There was also wariness about farm visits, as some consumers might feel that farmers could be putting on a good impression, but actually doing things differently once they were gone. This was a problem that some farmers such as Teacher Huang, the owner of a free range chicken farm, were aware of. He said, "Some people feel that farm visits are a show [performance]. So we tell consumers to drop in whenever they feel like, unannounced so they can see the farm as it is. If they still don't believe me after that, there's nothing [more] I can do." This issue is even more urgent when taking into

account the food safety scandals that have become prevalent in China, which have eroded public trust (Yan, 2012).

Pamphlets, fact sheets and scrap books are full of symbols that potential customers can interpret to be demonstrative of how the ecological produce is grown or raised without the use of synthetic inputs. Those customers who were satisfied with what they see on the farm or in the pamphlets, fact sheets and scrap books that the farmers bring with them to the market and the quality of the produce, end up becoming loyal customers that spread positive word of mouth and legitimise the claims of the ecological farmers, building the farmers' reputations as being trustworthy in the eyes of other potential customers. For those potential customers who wanted more convincing the next step was a visit to the farm. Farm visits epitomized what Kjaernes et al (2013) refer to as an exercise in transparency. Having consumers visit the farms presented the ecological farmers with an opportunity to break down the barriers of alienation in the open market, as consumers can go beyond a piece of paper or a voiced claim in the farmers' market, and see how the produce at the farmers' markets is actually grown. They can see for themselves how the reality compares with the claims that the ecological farmers make when they are selling at the market, confirming the inputs the farmers use such as manure from ducks or confirming that the watermelon does indeed come from Chongming, and that the duck eggs come from wild ducks that lay smaller eggs.

### **Free Samples: Gift, Trap or Familiarisation Tool?**

Another common technique that the ecological farmers would use to attract customers at the farmers' market was to offer free samples of their produce. At the market, farmers could familiarise potential customers by having them taste the

produce, and building a rapport with them and educating them about how the produce is grown. The goal was to familiarise potential customers with their produce and prove that their produce tastes different and is indeed superior to conventional produce grown with synthetic inputs, and therefore earn the trust of passers-by. However, free samples are not guaranteed to succeed. Some people may find that the taste is not to their liking, while others may not wish to take the sample as they do not want to feel obligated to make a purchase.

In his study of farmers' market consumers in Ireland, Oliver Moore (2006: 424) found that the majority of consumers used taste as a metric for whether a farmers' claims about their produce were trustworthy. Free samples offered at the farmers' markets included prepared items such as the salted duck eggs, samples of seasonal produce such as tomatoes or a common favourite, homemade tofu from their own grown soy beans. Some of the farmers would even have their own grinder to mill dried soy beans to make fresh soy milk. The most ambitious were the Wang Sisters. During the autumn of 2014 when I began my fieldwork, the Wang sisters would offer samples of their sweet potatoes and rice milk, prepared in a room with a kitchenette that was provided by the venue.

The farmers wanted consumers to taste the superior quality of their produce in comparison to conventional produce at the supermarket. The farmers hoped that the taste of the samples would convince passers-by that ecological produce was superior to conventional produce, as it tasted more flavoursome than produce grown with synthetic inputs. Some farmers reported that consumers of a certain age could recall the same taste in vegetables grown before wide spread use of synthetic pesticides, fertilisers and herbicides. A founder of one of Shanghai's first eco farms, who had left the industry, shared with me, "We would grow peppers and customers

would say, ‘wow these peppers taste like the ones from my childhood’ when they tried them. I remember a time in Inner Mongolia before the use of synthetic inputs and that’s what our peppers taste like.” Many older consumers still had memories of a time before synthetic inputs were widely used in agriculture and how the produce used to taste, while younger consumers were impressed by the extra flavour in ecological produce that they have not tasted in conventional produce. Handing out free samples did not always work and there was always the chance that consumers would taste the sample and form a negative impression of the farmer, as a result. For example, Big Sister Wang would make salted eggs, curing the mallard eggs from the farm in a salt brine, and bring them to sell at the market offering small pieces as samples. While my friends and I were among the many consumers who enjoyed the taste, there would also be some consumers who would scrunch up their faces and complain about how salty the eggs were.

Yet, samples do indeed distinguish ecological produce from conventional produce, and consumers who can taste the difference will either be convinced to buy some produce on the spot, or visit the ecological farmers’ farms to see how their produce can taste so good. Familiarity builds trust, and tasting the food familiarises consumers with the flavour, and if they can taste the difference the flavour can be a sign of distinction between ecological produce and conventional produce (Luhmann, 1988). The flavour of ecological food can prove the competence of the farmers at growing food without the use of synthetic inputs (Barber, 1983). Thus, handing out free samples served the economic interests of farmers as a promotional tactic to reach consumers, though some consumers were wary of this and would shy away from taking the offered free samples.

One morning at a market in the Crystal Bay Mansions gated community, Sister Wang had cut some tomatoes for passers-by to try. Many of them nodded politely in response to her calls to come over to try some, and smiled sheepishly before heading off. Sister Wang said exasperatedly, “Come and taste it, you don’t have to buy it”. One of the problems with the use of free samples was that many passers-by would decline the offer due to their concern about having to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the farmer, as they felt that the free samples were a gift that needed to be reciprocated. Offer (1997: 455) writes that “the obligation to reciprocate is typically a burden, which can only be relieved by means of a return gift. Asking for help is psychologically difficult, and so is the obligation to reciprocate. Excessive intimacy can be stressful”. Some passers-by were wary of free samples and what they felt was the resulting obligation to make a purchase from the ecological farmers. In his study of gift exchange in a Chinese village, Yunxiang Yan (1996) found that his interlocutors would sometimes feel shamed into an obligatory gifts when they were sent an invitation to events such as wedding banquets.

By offering free samples, the majority of the farmers aimed to demonstrate the superior flavour of their produce and therefore legitimise their claims that their produce is grown without synthetic inputs. The goal was for these passers-by to eventually become customers and form a bond of familiarity with the farmers and return regularly to future farmers’ markets to buy produce from them, or better still ordering delivery boxes. However, the samples can also be interpreted as gifts that some felt obligated to reciprocate with a purchase of the farmers’ produce.



### **‘Our Customers are Our Friends’: Forming Social Relations with Customers**

The farmers would often refer to the relationship between themselves and their most loyal customers as a friendship. They and farmers market organisers like Old Yu aimed to operate as an alternative to the open market, choosing to create a closed economy of loyal customers that would become friends with farmers and visit the farms for activities such as rice harvests. This was the opposite of the alienated food chain that separated consumers from the source of their food and amplified the distrust in the food system in China (Yan, 2012). The ecological farmers were seeking to overcome the barrier of distrust and consumer apprehensions about them being purveyors of fake produce, and demonstrate to consumers that their produce was what they said it was. The consumer of conventional produce is alienated from the producer and cannot tell if the producer shares the same concern for food safety that she does.

The idea of friendship is invoked by the ecological farmers when they talk about loyal customers. This practice is not restricted to China. Kirwan (2006: 309-310) found consumers in farmers’ markets in the UK were willing to suspend their belief that the stall holders valued social interaction with them beyond just being a means to increase sales. Stall holders regarded customers at farmers’ markets to be friends even though their interactions were limited to as little as a couple of sentences each week such as tacit greetings (Kirwan, 2006: 309). Indeed, on several occasions at the farmers’ markets I heard the ecological farmers referring to their customers as friends with statements such as, “We’re all friends (*women dou shi pengyou*)”. On another occasion when I went to visit a farm organised by Old Yu, the organiser of Our Piece of Ground farmers’ market, the farmer remarked, “Consumers come and visit our farm. They become our customers and then they become our

friends.” At the conclusion of the farm visit that day the farm owner said, “See many of these folks will become our friends.”

At a salon at the Our Piece of Ground farmers’ market, Sister Wang remarked, “I’m grateful to my customers. When they become close customers I’m willing to extend 30 days credit because we’re friends after all.” However, as many of the farmers have noted, dealing with customers who are friends and family can be more demanding than dealing with people in a purely commercial context due to the obligations of social relations in Chinese society (Yan, 1996; Stafford, 2000a; Yang, 1994). So, while Sister Wang lauded the consumers at the salon, I often heard her complain about her first batch of customers from her husband’s work place.

*Sister Wang: I'm not sure about them anymore. They don't really buy that much from me. I get the feeling that they are in it just to get a bargain. They're paying a discounted rate.*

*Pang: How much?*

*Sister Wang: 20% off.*

*Pang: How much do they buy from you each month? RMB3000, 4000?*

*Sister Wang: No! They only buy about RMB2000 or so.*

*Pang: Does that include the discount.*

*Sister Wang: That's after the discount.*

*Pang: So they're getting RMB2500 worth of produce.*

*Sister Wang: More than that. The prices we give them are discounted from our prices before we put them up.*

Friends also have expectations and limits as to how much they are willing to spend, as shown in Sister Wang’s case above. Because they had been loyal customers from the very beginnings of Camelia Grove, Sister Wang was reluctant to charge them higher prices as her costs increased. She also felt that these customers were just after a bargain. This was an opinion shared by other farmers. I asked Little Wang, a farmer who used to work for an IT company why she did not target their former

colleagues as their customers, as they seemed to be in the ideal demographic of white collar professionals with young families.

*Pang: Your former colleagues may buy from you...*

*Little Wang: Our friends may not be the right target market. The company does a lot of tuangou (group purchasing [see Wang et al, 2014]) and it's about price like fruit for RMB10 per catty outside selling for RMB6 per catty. They might be parents as well, but they might be OK eating conventional food.*

In his study of reunion and separation Charles Stafford (2000) points out that mandatory detaining of close guests is a form of etiquette, where the host persuades a guest to stay a while longer as a sign of their friendship rather than a genuine invitation to linger longer. Similarly, in the setting of the farmers' market certain etiquette had to be observed between friends. Sister Wang felt obligated to give her husband's colleagues a discount even though she found it to be a bit painful, financially. Little Wang being more business savvy was aware of this pitfall, and therefore chose not to target her former colleagues in the IT industry.

In terms of trust, friendship suggests that farmers will look out for the interests of their customers ahead of their own (Barber, 1983; Misztal, 1996). Social relations in China can be divided into instrumental connections known as *Guanxi*, and more sentiment based relations, *renqing* (Yang, 1994). Being based more on sentiment, *renqing* demonstrates the principles of the friendship relations that the farmers aspire to build. Renqing suggests that a friend would not harm you, and therefore the farmers wanting to prove that they are indeed telling the truth seek to create social relations built on renqing rather than the conventional relations based on the exchange of money for a commodity. This was evident in the discourse among many farmers about their customers being friends. Sister Wang's willingness to extend credit to her most loyal customers was an example of this good will. She was willing to negatively impact the cash flow of her farm to foster the friendship

between herself and Camelia Grove's most loyal customers. The ecological farmers and farmers' market organisers alike were well aware of the importance of building relations that were more personal than conventional instrumental economic relations, where the farmers produced a commodity that satisfied the needs of consumers and charged higher prices to make a profit. To that end they felt that relations should be social rather than just economic and strove to create a closed economy with closer relations built on mutual regard between consumer and producer (Offer, 1997). However, as Yan (1996:22) points out, "Under the guidance of renqing ethics, the pursuit of personal interest is intermingled with the fulfilment of moral obligations." In exchange for regular patronage the farmers are expected to give discounts.

A genuine friendship between farmer and customer is not easy to achieve.

Indeed, as Misztal (1996:176-177) notes:

*"Trust, as a basis for friendship, involves a distinctive solution to problems of interpersonal uncertainty. Since we are always faced with 'the unknowability of others' (Simmel 1950). And since they are free to act against our interest, believing in others' good will involves the element of risk. Trusting despite the uncertainty 'affirms the impossibility of betrayal despite its existential possibility' (Silver 1989: 276)."*

In the eyes of passers-by the ecological farmers are unknown strangers and cannot be trusted to come through on their claims of produce that has been grown without the use of the synthetic inputs. Therefore, forming a reciprocal relationship of give and take with the farmers was a risk for potential customers.

## **Conclusion**

The ecological farmers were seeking to create a base of loyal customers who trusted that their produce was grown without using synthetic inputs, but given the amount of food safety scandals in China and wariness toward private operators who were perceived as being willing to take short cuts at the expense of the consumer, this was no easy task. To that end the ecological farmers aimed to build a rapport with passers-by at the farmers' markets in order to break the ice. A rapport with passers-by at farmers' markets allowed the farmers to familiarise these potential customers with their produce through free samples that allowed them to taste the difference between ecological produce and conventional produce. A positive rapport also allowed the ecological farmers to inform passers-by about the growing practices on their farms. However, in order to build the necessary rapport that is the basis for forming friendships, potential customers would have to be willing to visit their stalls and engage with the farmers. This relies on the ability of the ecological farmers to convey enough regard to these people to attract their attention, while not becoming too obsequious or too friendly to the point where passers-by felt they were being targeted for a sale.

The ecological farmers felt that encouraging consumers to visit their farms would allow consumers to see how they farmed and legitimise them as a genuine alternative to fake organic foods and conventional producers who applied excessive levels of chemicals to their produce in order to boost yields. The farmers all aspired to have loyal customers who would create positive word of mouth and legitimise their claims to potential customers. Breaking down the barriers of alienation through the formation of friendships and familiarisation between the farmers and consumers through farm visits not only legitimises the claims of farmers, but also creates a sense

of accountability, and therefore trust. By fostering personal relations with their customers that blossom into friendships, the ecological farmers aim to create a bond of loyalty between consumers and farmers that is beneficial to both parties, as the farmers have an incentive to grow better, safer food for consumers, and consumers provide farmers with a steady stream of business.

Convincing potential customers that forming a friendship with the farmers is a risk worth taking was a challenge in the farmers' markets in Shanghai throughout the course of my fieldwork. However, friendships can also be a double edged sword for farmers, leading to as many obligations as they do benefits when forming relations, and these are friends who do not share the ethos of the farmers, as evidenced in the complaints that Sister Wang made about some of her husband's colleagues and Little Wang's dismissal of her former colleagues as potential customers. The relationship between this latter group of customers and the farmers is more akin to a *guanxi* relationship of utilitarian exchange of benefits rather than one of *renqing* built on mutual regard.

The way that the ecological farmers operate is based on interpersonal trust rather than the institutional trust that Yan (2012) advocates for in his research on food safety. The tactics that the ecological farmers use to gain the trust of passers-by are intended to enhance interpersonal trust rather than being based on legally binding contracts or certification. However, such relations carry with them obligations on both parties. As we saw farmers such as Sister Wang felt obligated to give the discounts to early, loyal customers such as her husband's colleagues even though her costs had increased. The farmers not only wish to form social relations with their customers, but also wish for those relations to be based on mutual appreciation rather

than obligation. It is the notion of mutual appreciation that I go on to discuss in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Ecological Farmers' Judgement of Consumers and Moral Distinction**

It had been a surprisingly warm day in early spring in Shanghai, and we had all been sweating from the direct glow of the sun shining down into the courtyard in the clubhouse of an affluent housing estate made up of townhouses with double garage in Pudong, Shanghai. This estate seemed to be the ideal place for the ecological farmers to promote and sell their produce. There was a base of potential customers, who had the trappings of wealth and seemed to be willing to pay for the food, in the residents. A couple of the farmers including the Wang Sisters and Old Zhao had been invited to participate in a market for the residents of the estate. Old Zhao was unable to make it in the early part of the day, so his nephew stood in for him. I asked him how business had been so far. He replied morosely, “Not good. The people here don't cook. That's why vegetables will not sell well here. The fruit stall, on the other hand is doing really well. The punters [*laobaixing*, literally old hundred names] are lining up. I can hardly get anyone to look at my produce.” The discourse of whether consumers cooked was common to all of the ecological farmers. After all, if a family did not cook, then what were the chances of them buying ecological produce and enjoying it? Of course, the farmers did not know all the passers-by well enough to know whether they actually cooked at home. They only had a perception of the lifestyles of these consumers, and their judgements reflected the farmers' choices to switch from urban middle-class lives to become farmers.

In this chapter I discuss the ecological farmers' expectations and judgements of consumers – their platonic ideal customer, the customer as a figure of empathy



and respect in comparison to other affluent consumers who had sufficient financial means to purchase ecological produce, but chose not to. The farmers were aware that their produce was not affordable to many people and only spent their energies targeting people they felt were affluent enough to buy their produce. This attitude was evident when Big Sister Wang and I went to help Old Yu hand out flyers to promote the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market at the market's new venue, the Altitude Art Centre. When I asked her why she was not handing out many flyers to passers-by, she noted that many of them did not look like the type who were affluent enough to be targeted. However, the farmers did not criticise people like these passers-by for their choices, as they understood that these people were unable to purchase ecological produce because they could not afford it.

The farmers categorise affluent consumers as either those who are unappreciative of and therefore unwilling to buy ecological produce, and those who seek a bargain and are unwilling to pay higher prices for ecological produce even though they have the means; or consumers who appreciate the efforts of ecological farmers and loyally buy ecological produce from them every week. It is this last group of potential customers that the ecological farmers aspire to target. I shed light on how the ecological farmers construct themselves, and their loyal customers who are part of their social world. I illustrate how the customers that the farmers respect the most are those who share the same beliefs about the importance of food grown in a more natural way and are willing to pay the price premium that the farmers see as the rightful price for ecological produce. Even friends and colleagues from the ecological farmers' social circles before they started farming are viewed through this lens of caring and negligence. In the eyes of the farmers, these people who have the financial means either care enough to provide the best ingredients for their families

by paying the higher prices for ecological food, or they are neglecting their families by going after bargains when shopping for food or choosing to spend their money on other goods such as designer handbags or mobile phones.

The categorisation and judgement of consumers by sellers is not new. Producers have also made judgements regarding the worthiness of consumers. In their study of alternative food producers and their customers in the UK Kneafsey et al (2008) found that producers seek customers who care about and appreciate the same issues as they do, and are willing to tolerate some of the shortcomings of buying from them. However, unlike the customers in the UK where Kneafsey et al (2008) carried out their study, the area of common interest between customer and producer in China was a concern about safety, specifically enthusiasm for produce grown without synthetic inputs rather than the more altruistic considerations such as environmental protection among customers in the UK.

The ecological farmers felt that those consumers who did not spend money on ecological produce when they had the means were neglecting their duty of care to their families and also to their own health. In contrast, the ecological farmers held their loyal customers, those who shared similar views about the moral imperatives of choosing the healthiest foods to cook and take care of their families, especially those who had to overcome resistance to purchase ecological produce in the highest regard. I suggest that the farmers are seeking a world where people appreciate the importance of safer food. The ecological farmers felt that anything less than making an effort to choose the best ingredients is an act of negligence to themselves and their families in the face of the increasing food safety scandals in China, and the solutions that they, the ecological farmers, are providing. Those consumers who made the effort to purchase ecological food have an elevated status in the eyes of the farmers,

acquiring a moral distinction from those consumers who choose not to spend money on ecological food. The sort of customer that the ecological farmers target reflects the ecological farmers' beliefs about the lifestyle that people should lead, including how consumers should spend their money and their practices of food consumption. The consumers who were most respected by farmers and welcomed into their social world were those who choose to spend money on goods that would improve the health of their families rather than goods and services that convey status. Therefore, those consumers who prepare meals at home and monitor what they are eating are respected and targeted by farmers as customers for their produce.

By deciding to return to the land and farm, the ecological farmers are making a stand against the alienation in the conventional food supply chain, and they are therefore most sympathetic to consumers who hold similar views and are appreciative of the farmers' decisions to grow ecological produce. In his book, *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) analysed the differences between people of different social classes and suggests that people of a higher social class distinguish themselves from those of lower classes through their consumption patterns and knowledge. Here, I apply Bourdieu's idea of distinction to the morality of ethical consumption. I suggest that in the social world the farmers aspire to build consumers achieve moral distinction based on caring about what they eat by making decisions such as choosing to consume ecological produce. The farmers are elevating themselves and those who share the same values regarding ecological produce to a higher moral status, above people who choose not to spend on ecological produce. In so doing they are drawing a moral distinction between those in their social world and people who choose not to spend money on ecological produce.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shed light on the attributes that the ecological farmers think that the ideal consumer should have. Next I discuss the different reactions that ecological farmers have toward different consumers. I elucidate the criticisms that the farmers make of consumers who choose not to buy ecological produce, even when they have the means. I then shed light on the other side of the continuum and discuss the empathy that the farmers have for customers who choose to buy ecological produce despite objections from other members of their households. I show that these differences are indicative of different peoples' idea of what constitutes good food, and how those that share the farmers' views are morally distinct in the eyes of the farmers.

### **Engaged and Sharing Similar Ethics: The Ideal Consumer in the eyes of the Ecological farmers**

In this section I discuss the attributes that ecological farmers look for in the ideal customer. I show that while affluence is a desirable attribute of potential customers, the farmers expect their most valued customers to possess more than wealth. To the farmers the ideal customer is well informed about the risks in the food system in the case of fresh produce, and engaged enough to act on the information available to them to purchase the produce grown by the ecological farmers (Moore, 2006). Such consumers did not merely buy products to exhibit their status, but were also making a statement of their values and beliefs about what constitutes good food. The shared appreciation of the qualities of food formed the backbone of the relationship of respect between the ecological farmers and their most loyal customers that undergirded the social world that the farmers were seeking to build.

When I asked Steven the owner of Clear Water Grain Farm who his ideal target market was, he replied, “Middle-class mothers with young families.” Stephen was referring to mothers with young children, who were at least middle-class and willing to pay the higher prices for ecological food, which is up to seven and a half times more expensive than conventional food. Further, because they had young children they were concerned about food safety and the harm that conventional food would have on the health of their children. As with other parts of the world, mothers are still regarded by farmers as the gate keeper for family food choices as they are elsewhere (Coveney et al, 2012: 627). This group of consumers was perceived by farmers to be willing to pay the higher prices that they charged for their produce, as they were wary of conventional food system. Peter Leutchford (2007: 179) points to the possibility of certain consumers as ethical actors who move beyond merely obtaining the highest quality produce for the lowest possible price. He notes that such consumers are often economically middle-class or above (Luetchford, 2008: 181). Affluence and a willingness to pay a higher price also applies to the type of consumers who the farmers targeted. The motives of such Chinese consumers was based on distrust in the food system. This was also found to be the case in other studies. Tamas Dombos notes in his study of the motives for ethical consumption that lack of trust in industrial, capitalistic modes of production has been a factor leading Hungarians to choose ethical consumption (2010: 136). Ethical consumption is also a signal of protest against a corrupted system, as Giovanni Orlando illustrates in his study of organic food consumption in Palermo (2010: 151). Matchar (2013) had similar findings in her research on the New Domesticity movement USA in which the motives for her interlocutors to track where their produce came from was due to distrust in the food system and corporations. Both Orlando and Matchar point

out that engaging in this type of consumption is not cheap and more readily accessible to affluent consumers. Thus, the attraction of sites for farmers' markets such as Big Horizon Plaza and Crystal Bay Mansions lay in their high property prices, which was due to the quality of the schools in the neighbourhood.

The ecological farmers were also aware of the affluence required to buy ecological produce. On a warm spring day I accompanied Big Sister Wang to a boutique selling designer label bags and clothing, owned by an affluent customer of hers, Little Li. The boutique was part of a stretch of shops along the outside wall of a gated community with neat black gates that looked well-kept and hinted at the potential wealth and status of the residents inside (Tomba, 2009). They talked about the prospect of her selling some of Camilia Grove's rice there. Little Li was a lady in her early 30s who had a young toddler whom her mother helped to look after. The boutique was full of Gucci Jeans, Armani T-shirts and various designer hand bags. It spoke of aspirational consumption, a place to target the middle-class consumers that the government was trying to foster. Along with this highly fashionable merchandise there were also imported dietary supplements such as vitamins and a range of merchandise for toddlers from dummies to milk powder. On a display with the items for babies was some of Camilia Grove's sprouting rice. Little Li and Sister Wang spoke for a while about how much Little Li enjoyed the taste of the rice and how best to sell it. "We'll be renovating the upstairs space soon. Here let me show you," Little Li said. She took us to the front of the store where the stairs led to a small mezzanine floor. "So we can invite groups of ladies here for special events to show our merchandise". The light bulb went off in both of our heads when Big Sister Wang and I heard this. Later, after we left the boutique I said, "That little space would be ideal for you to do a tasting for the ladies in the gated community".

Big Sister Wang replied, “That’s what I was thinking”.

I had saw signs of wealth and aspirational consumption as I walked to the shop, including a branch of the Jamaica Blue café which could often be found in areas with highly educated professionals or high end consumers. The café served muffins, sandwiches and various hot beverages not unlike Starbucks, but was less common and targeted more at a cosmopolitan clientele willing to engage with foreign foods (Anagnost, 2008). I pointed this out to Big Sister Wang as we left, “I knew this estate was wealthy as soon as I saw that café”. The wealth of the area combined with Little Li’s accessibility to young women with young families made this an ideal site for Big Sister Wang to pursue. Little Li’s store outside a gated community was very much an exemplar of what Hanser and Li (2015) call “gated consumption” where affluent consumers, who have opted out of main stream distribution channels for goods in order to protect the health of their families in the face of food safety scandals in China, could be found. With her own boutique outside an affluent gated community that sold foods that she sourced from suppliers such as Camelia Grove, Little Li was most certainly a gated consumer.

Affluence was not the only criterion that the farmers used to evaluate potential customers, the farmers also valued those consumers who appreciated the qualities of ecological food such as the flavour and were willing to make an effort to seek out quality produce. These criteria were exemplified by a regular customer at the farmers’ markets, Kelly. She was a frequent visitor to the farmers’ market where she would buy the ecological farmers’ produce because she felt that the produce tasted of themselves, and for her it was important since she could not add too much seasoning when cooking due to her husband’s illness. She was regarded as one of the super customers of the ecological farmers as she bought produce from them every

week. Kelly was informed and engaged about the nutritional content and benefits of food stuffs and appreciated the benefits of ecological food. When she found out that I was a doctoral researcher, she asked me to recommend some reading materials about food. She had a toddler and she prepared her meals at home, of which the farmers and I suspected, to avoid the additives and high levels of seasonings when eating out. The farmers sought customers such as Kelly, as they were the people who would most appreciate the farmers' efforts.

The appreciation of the reasons that had led the farmers to make the decision to farm was also important, as it was one of the main foundations of the bond that undergirded the social world that the ecological farmers aspired to share with their customers. During the summer when I was staying at Clear Water Grain Farm I encountered a lady who was a friend of Steven, the owner. She had brought her daughter with her to stay on the farm to learn more about nature. Because she understood and appreciated the reason for the farm's existence Stephen's friend exemplified the ideal customer that the farmers aspired to target and invited into their social world.

### **‘They Don’t Cook Much’: The Farmers’ Articulation of their Ethos through Non-Cooking and Cooking**

In the eyes of the farmers, many consumers who had the means to spend money on ecological food chose not to, and this was a source of frustration among some of the farmers and the volunteers who manned their stalls at the market. As Sister Wang shared with me, "The average person is not willing to spend a significant amount of money on food. For example, when I told a lady the price for my sweet potatoes,



RMB15 per catty, she told me that she could get it for RMB2.00 per catty at the wet market. There's only a small portion of people willing to pay the prices [that we are asking] in the market." The farmers sometimes felt that even affluent consumers could not be relied on as potential customers. Ecological farmers like Big Sister Wang, were critiquing the materialism of consumers, and their superficiality. Their perception was that most consumers preferred to spend their money on more conspicuous items of consumption such as designer hand bags or the latest Samsung Galaxy or iPhone. "People here [in Shanghai] have this really bad habit of spending money on what they wear rather than what they eat... They're more concerned about their appearance and wearing this or that rather than the inside [with what they eat]," Big Sister Wang said. Big Sister Wang was not materialistic but rather modest. She would talk to me about going to Hong Kong and not seeing the point of the trip, as she did not really care about shopping (*gouwu*). The Wang sisters did not have a brand name smart phone or designer handbags. They felt that consumers should spend their money on the safe, nutritious ecological produce that they were growing rather than on other luxury goods, as health and safety should have higher priorities. After all, the farmers had abandoned this type of aspirational consumption, so they wondered why the consumers could not do the same given their concerns about food safety.

Early in my fieldwork in October 2015, I was tasked with looking after the farmers' market with A Guo, a friend of Old Yu's, the farmers' market organiser who was absent during the holiday period. I talked to him about who would buy their produce. I remarked on the potential of someone like Karen. A Guo remarked, "I doubt she does much cooking". I had assumed that affluence and her age and profession, made her the ideal target market for the ecological farmers. I thought that

given that Karen was in her mid to late thirties, well-educated with a high paying white collar job and that she had organised for the farmers' market to be at Big Horizon Plaza, she would be more than willing to spend money at the market. However, A Guo questioned whether she would have any use for quality produce if she did not even cook at home.

For farmers, one of the main prerequisites that they look for in customers is that they cook meals at home, regularly. This criterion was also used by the farmers to explain the lack of customers at the farmers' market. A common refrain among the farmers when their produce was not selling as well as expected was that the consumers passing by did not cook. They perceived that those who did not cook would not want to buy ingredients for cooking regardless of the price. Once when I asked Sister Wang about the potential of her husband's workplace as a major hub for customers, she noted that a number of her white collar customers did not order that much from here because they seldom cooked at home and would only buy her produce for weekends to cook up a special treat, as they ate out most nights of the week, perhaps only preparing a meal at home on the weekend.

There was also the issue of who did the cooking in the household. Some households had domestic helpers, who were responsible for shopping for ingredients as well as cooking. When I asked A Guo if the farmers could just target their employers he shook his head. Farmers like A Guo felt that employers would not give the helpers extra money to spend on ecological food because it would only lead to them buying conventional produce and pocketing the difference (see Yan, 2008). For households that did not have helpers, many farmers felt that it was the older generation, the retired grandparents, who did the cooking rather than the young white collar workers, and this older generation were unwilling to spend money on

ecological food. As we shall see later, this also presented challenges to the ecological farmers.

The farmers felt that those who had the disposable income and did not cook would not appreciate their produce. Many of the farmers felt that their produce should only be accessed and bought by those who appreciated it, specifically, people who cooked at home. To the farmers, cooking was a relatively simple thing to do as A Guo once remarked of cooking ecological produce, “all you need is a couple of ingredients to bring out the flavour of the vegetables - a bit of wine, some soy sauce and that’s it”, because the flavour of the produce was so much better. Customers such as Kelly, who made their own meals at home and kept things simple to preserve the natural flavour of the produce fit into this ethos and were well respected by the farmers, and were therefore the ideal type of customers that the farmers aspired to sell their produce to.

To the farmers cooking was an important marker of those who had the commitment to invest in their own health in the face of food safety risks. As A Guo remarked to me once, “You end up eating all sorts of rubbish (*nuanqibazao de dongxi*) when you eat out”. Where home cooked meals represent warmth, comfort and care, a restaurant meal represents convenience, but at the cost of not knowing where the ingredients come from (Wolfson et al, 2016: 152). Cooking at home allows for control of what goes into the dishes and the filtering out of “questionable ingredients” present in convenience foods and canned foods, as Simmons and Chapman (2012: 1189) found in their study of home cooking by families in Canada. A home cooked meal made from ecological produce was more of a treat than an everyday act of care (Miller, 1998). In the eyes of the ecological farmers, given the food safety scares, cooking at home is the responsible thing to do. Cooking has been

regarded as part of the responsibility of caregivers, more often than not, women (Coveney et al, 2012). The farmers' targeting of young mothers was based on the idea of the responsibility of the mother to protect the family, or more specifically, to do what was best for their children through cooking. Building on the work of Marjorie Devault (1991) on women's roles in preparing the family meal as an act of care, Daniel Miller (1998) found in his study of shopping that it was the mother who tried to buy foods that were better for her family's health in order to show her love and care for her family. In the case of consumers in Shanghai, the farmers saw it as a failure to protect their families from unsafe food when there were safe alternatives like their produce. To them the best way to guarantee safety was to know where your ingredients come from, and the ecological farmers like Sister Wang felt that their ingredients were the best. Overall the ecological farmers felt that someone who cooked at home was someone who not only appreciated their efforts in growing safe and nutritious produce, but also took the effort to prepare their own meals and in so doing watched what they are eating. Thus, consumers who ate out often were seen to be less moral in the eyes of farmers such as Sister Wang because they did not share a common ethos. Coveney et al (2012) found that cooking was a way for citizens to judge themselves and each other in terms of mutual surveillance. I suggest in the case of the ecological farmers at farmers' markets that cooking at home was a way for farmers to judge whether consumers were appreciative of their efforts, and also to judge them morally as either dutifully caring for the health of themselves and their families or neglecting these concerns.

Sister Wang would often remark on how pretentious the middle classed could be. "You know the type who would pay hundreds of yuan for a glass of wine at Xintiandi or buy Louis Vuitton handbags," she would say. She pointed out that she

used to be one of these people, but had left what she saw as a pretentious lifestyle behind to start her farm. “My friends and I used to party hard and muck around in hotel rooms,” Sister Wang continued. For her and other ecological farmers like her, the aim was to educate and persuade consumers to spend their money differently in an era when the amount of income spent on food is declining (Croll, 2006: 35). They felt that consumers should spend less on luxury consumer goods such as brand name smart phones and hand bags to spending more on food and making an effort to cook more. Those who did not meet these criteria were judged negatively by the farmers to be neglecting their duty of care to themselves and their families.

### **Empathy: Ecological farmers’ Attitudes and Relationships with Loyal Customers**

In this section I show that how farmers have a special place in their hearts for customers who purchase ecological produce despite facing opposition from members of their households. Unlike consumers who chose to spend money on goods other than ecological produce, who were criticised by the farmers for their consumption choices, the farmers’ loyal customers were often held in a positive light. This was particularly the case for those customers who had to face obstacles in the consumption of ecological food within their households. These customers were often empathised with by farmers and were appreciated for making the effort to consume ecological produce despite objections from other members of their households.

It was not easy being a consumer of ecological food, as many people, sometimes including members of the same household, did not have the same view on the ecological farmers’ produce. While some consumers found it worth the price, which could be up to seven and half times the price of conventional produce, others,

sometimes even in the same household, found it difficult to warrant spending that sort of money on food. Thus, consumers would sometimes conceal the price of items that they bought from ecological farmers from other family members. This was particularly acute in households with multiple generations, as many of the older generation found the price of the ecological produce that their children were buying to be too dear. Thus, even if the farmer could gain the trust of a young mother or father, sometimes other members of the household who did not have the same spending habits, would not be in favour of these purchases, leading to deception between generations.

On a delivery to a customer after the Saturday morning farmers' market at Crystal Bay Mansions which ended at 12 noon, Big Sister Wang and I arrived outside of an apartment estate nearby. The customer in question was absent, out on that rainy Saturday when we were there to make the delivery, so she told Big Sister Wang to leave the delivery at the guard's house at the entry to the apartment estate. However, surprisingly an old lady in a printed blouse and black pants came and enquired about the delivery, asking if it was for the Zhang family. Big Sister Wang called the customer to confirm that the old lady was indeed her mother in law. The call was on speaker and I could hear the customer ask Big Sister Wang, "You haven't told her the price have you?" After the customer hung up Big Sister Wang said sympathetically, "Poor thing. She can't even tell her mother in law the price." In Shanghai the price of ecologically grown produce is up to seven and a half times the price of conventional produce, thus many consumers, even those who could afford it, baulk at the price. This is especially the case for the older generation, who were over 55 and retired. This was evident in an encounter between Sister Wang and the mother

of one of her customers, who had come to the farmers' market to pick up some produce for her daughter. "How much is the pumpkin?" The old lady asked. "It's RMB15 per catty, that's 8 catties, so it's RMB120," Sister Wang replied. "Do you have any smaller ones?" The old lady replied. "My daughter will be travelling for work and I will be the only one at home. I can't eat that much." "Pumpkins can keep for a while." "We can't finish it, and I don't want to waste it." "That's fine." Sister Wang replied, as she took back the pumpkin. As I looked at Sister Wang in dismay, she replied, "don't worry I'll call her daughter and check." As soon as the old lady left and was out of earshot, Sister Wang called the old lady's daughter to confirm. After the call ended, Sister Wang said, "I'll deliver the pumpkin to them after the market is finished. Her daughter told me to tell her that the price is RMB39.50 next time."

As can be seen from the examples above, the consumers who tend to conceal prices tend to be younger, with the older members of their households being hesitant to spend money on ecological food. It could also be said that younger consumers were more willing to spend than their elders. I suggest that this difference in attitudes towards ecological produce between different generations in households is indicative of the new spending habits formed in an age of abundance after the opening up reforms in comparison to the limited choices during the high communist era, a change that scholars of food consumption in China have noted (see Croll, 2006). The willingness to spend reflects the different ideas that people of different generations hold about what good food should be. Those consumers who held a similar view to the ecological farmers about what constituted good food and showed a willingness to spend money on good food were genuinely viewed by farmers as friends and

welcomed as members of the ecological farmers' social world. Those customers who were seeking a bargain through their pre-existing social relations with the farmers such as Sister Wang's husband's colleagues were viewed negatively as bargain hunters by the farmers, as their commitment to finding the healthiest and safest foods was questionable, and they are therefore viewed by the farmers as being outsiders to their social world with regard to notions of what constitutes quality food, as we saw in Chapter Five. It is to the issue of what constitutes good food that I turn to next.

### **Qualities of Good Food in China**

“Alternative food consumption is an important locus for conceptualising how certain materials are classified as good to eat, stressing that *goodness* is intimately associated with the moral attribution of a moral quality to food” (Sassatelli, 2004: 182).

Good food can mean a number of different things to different people. Affordability and abundance might be priorities, but safety and ethics are also qualities of food that can constitute good food in the minds of different consumers. These differences were very much evident in the farmers' judgment of consumers and also in the decision of different consumers as to whether they should buy ecological produce. For some people good food may mean affordable food. Others may view convenience as an attribute of good food, while people who are keen to exhibit status may feel that good food can be had when eating out at a fancy restaurant. In contemporary China, in the face of constant news about food safety scandals, safe food produced without synthetic inputs has come to be considered good food. In this section I elucidate the different ideas of what constitutes good food, and how it is shaped by the peoples' individual experiences. I will show that the difference between consumers regarding



their willingness to spend money on ecological food is shaped by factors such as political economy and personal experience.

The farmers often have to deal with the willingness of different generations of consumers to pay for their produce. Food should have a proper price, but what is the fair price? The shoppers in Nanjing's food markets that Veeck studied felt that there was a proper price to pay for food at the markets, and the skill was to negotiate this price, and consumers did not want to get cheated out of the best price (Veeck, 2000: 112). As well as affordability, the disagreement about the proper price for food is reflective of the differences in what is considered to be good food between generations. So what qualities make food good? Fresh and nutritious food is regarded as good food by most people (Harvey et al, 2004). Different eras remain in the memories of different generations, shaping their beliefs about what constitutes good food. During the era of High Communism under Mao Zedong, food prices were capped by the state in an effort to meet their food distribution goals (Croll, 1982). This continued up to the early 1980s in the early years of the reform era under Deng, when prices for non-staple food items in urban areas were "set by the municipality, city or town commercial bureau" (Croll, 1982: 223).

Good food was once predicated on affordability and having enough to eat in the aftermath of unequal distribution during the republican era (Feuchtwang, 2011: 50; Farquhar 2002: 83-84). During the era of high communism the rationing system was intended to ensure that everyone had enough to eat. Quality was not the main consideration in the mess halls of the communes and work units (Watson, 2011). Furthermore, cities were given priority in this distribution in the state's bid to foster industrial development (Croll, 1982: 126). Thus, in cities such as Shanghai, good food was cheap and affordable food during the high communist era up to the early

reform era. In Shanghai, meals were available for low prices in work unit mess halls, and were 35% cheaper than the average restaurant in the city (Croll, 1982: 231-234). Many of those who had the strongest recollections of this era of cheap, abundant food, albeit interspersed with years of famine, were the parents and grandparents of customers. They were often unaccustomed to paying the prices that the farmers charged for their food and did not seem to see the value in doing so. To these non-consumers of ecological produce, food security was the main priority and good food should therefore be inexpensive and plentiful.

In the period immediately after opening up reforms good food became more hedonistic, as noted by Judith Faruqhar (2002: 43-44) with her example of indulging in lychees when she was in China in the early 1980s. This was the beginning of an era of increasing varieties of food in the market place (Croll, 1982; Veeck, 2006). The quality also eventually improved with increasing market competition (Veeck, 2006). During this time convenience food such as pre-made dishes and dehydrated instant noodles started to be promoted by the state (Croll, 1982: 317-318). Good food became abundant in variety and convenient to consume, compared to the limited seasonal offerings of the ecological farmers at the farmers' market and the infrequency of the market. Of course, the farmers countered this discourse with an alternative ethos of seasonality and food grown in the slower traditional way that they argued was safer and healthier. This message appealed in particular to parents of young children or pregnant mothers. Indeed, Veeck (2006: 120-121) found that the needs of children were one of the highest priorities of shoppers in Nanjing. This was evident in Yuhua Guo's (2000) study of different knowledges of food in three generation households consisting of grand-parents, parents and children in Beijing. The parents were very much concerned about the nutritional properties of food from

the perspective of vitamins and minerals (Guo, 2000: 101). This contrasted with the grandparents, whom some of the parents felt lacked the scientific knowledge about food due to lack of abundance (Guo, 2000: 100). Thus, women are often viewed as the target audience for the farmers, as they are the ones most directly responsible for the nutritional needs of families (Guo, 2000; Charles and Kerr, 1988). However, foodstuffs were only one of many categories of goods available on the market in the wake of economic reforms, as white goods, consumer electronics including VCRs, DVD players and, more recently, smart phones became objects of desire to consumers (Davis, 2000; Croll, 2006). The farmers' white collar friends and former colleagues exemplify this ethos of aspirational consumption, as basic food stuffs such as produce are near the bottom of their list of aspirational items. The farmers themselves had clearly chosen to prioritise their consumption on food, while they felt that those consumers and former friends and colleagues that they criticised had not.

As food safety scares started increasing (see discussion in Chapter Two) good food also came to mean food that was safe to consume. Food safety changed from incidents of food poisoning arising from mishandling of food in canteens and mess halls to deliberate adulteration by producers or excessive use of agricultural chemicals by farmers (Yan, 2015). This is reflective of the ethos of a generation that came of age in the open market era, where first cheating on quantity and then quality of food became issues that concerned consumers. Thus, today, as well as price, abundance and convenience, safety has become a signifier of good food. It is into this milieu that the ecological farmers come with their produce as a solution to concerns about food safety.

The ecological farmers see themselves as providers of safe, nutritious food that consumers with the means should be willing to pay for if they know what good

food is supposed to be. To them, consumers could forego the purchase of other goods which the farmers view as less necessary, such as a Gucci hand bag or the latest iPhone. Those who chose to spend their money on material goods and status symbols were regarded as not having good values (*linian*) by farmers like Sister Wang. As for those from older generations, who grew up during the time when the state subsidised food, the farmers bypassed them to target their children, who were more willing spenders. These younger consumers were viewed with empathy by the farmers, while their parents were often viewed as not having the morals to choose ecological food and were therefore gate keepers to be bypassed.

As we have seen, political economic factors including the food distribution under different economic regimes, such as state controlled food distribution during the high communist era, can shape the beliefs of a generation about what constitutes good food. As political economic circumstances change so do ideas of what constitutes good food. The opening up of markets has led to an increasing abundance of places where people can buy their food including restaurants and supermarkets. Thus, good food has gone from being affordable in the state controlled distribution system to being convenient and abundant in variety since the opening up of markets. Both of these ideas of good food presented challenges to the ecological farmers in the market place, as their produce was both expensive and also not as varied as what could be found in other retail channels.

## **Conclusion**

“People [consumers] are too demanding. They want their food to be cheap, pretty healthy and safe. How is that possible (*zenme keneng*)?!’ – Old Zhao.

In this chapter I have shed light on the ecological farmers' perceptions and feelings about consumers. The farmers' perceptions of consumers reflected their moral beliefs about what good food should be and consumers' spending habits in relation to food. The ecological farmers' feelings about consumers who did not buy ecological produce was one of frustration at their spending habits, which valued conspicuous consumption rather than private consumption. The fact that many consumers who showed the trappings of wealth were unwilling to spend on better quality food was appalling to many of the ecological farmers like the Wang sisters and Old Zhao. As we can see in the quote above, Old Zhao railed against consumers' desire for cheap food that met all their criteria from aesthetics to safety, all at a low price, reflecting the economically rational objective of obtaining the best quality for the cheapest price. As Old Zhao pointed out this expectation was not realistic. Old Zhao felt that good food could either be cheap or safe and healthy, but not all of these things together. If consumers wanted food to be safe and healthy they should be willing to pay higher price for it. Farmers such as the Wang sisters were critical of consumers with the means, who would not abandon their aspirations for expensive consumer goods like hand bags for better quality food. Indeed, these were farmers that could speak with some degree of authority as many of them had abandoned urban middle-class lifestyles for farming, as I showed in Chapter Three.

In her study of the political morality of food, Roberta Sassatelli points out that "social moralisation – in the form of moral rhetorics which accompany the use and deployment of goods- is an important process both because those rhetorics contribute to the classification and qualification of goods to which they refer and because they help to define visions of social and personal order" (2004: 179). This is very much the case for the ecological farmers. Their judgements of consumers, and

categorisation of them as either loyal consumer-friends or consumers who neglect their own health and health of their families by spending money on fashionable consumer goods are indicative of the farmers' moral order. The ecological farmers' perception of loyal customers as friends reflects their respect and appreciation for those people they feel share their ethos. The shared ethos between ecological farmers and loyal customers was exemplified by the regular customer Kelly, who was at the market every week buying produce from different farmers and chatting with them. Her views regarding the flavour of ecological produce and how the produce does not need much in the way of seasonings are similar to A Guo.

The farmers were of the opinion that only those willing to spend money on ecological produce deserved to have access to the safe and delicious food that they were producing. They also felt that such consumers inhabited the same social world as they do, sharing the same ethos regarding the failures of the conventional food system in China (Dombos, 2013). The farmers felt that consumers' willingness to spend money on ecological produce was a gesture of solidarity with their decision to move back to the land, which earned their trust and friendship as well as an invitation to join their social world (Gronow, 2004). These were not just people looking for a bargain in the open market, but people seeking to engage in social relations with the farmers that stretched beyond the interactions based on market transactions. This ethos was respected by ecological farmers such as Sister Wang who had changed her own consumption habits by abandoning materialistic consumption to become a farmer.

Ecological farmers' perceptions of customers reflected their world view. Consumers who were perceived to be wealthy enough to afford the prices but chose not to, were criticised by farmers for being materialistic and even negligent in the

face of food safety concerns. Instead of going out for the majority of their meals as a signifier of being successful and high status, which is the way the mainstream media and popular discourse construct the new affluent, middle-class in China, the ecological farmers have abandoned these forms of conspicuous consumption. This sentiment was evident in Sister Wang's criticism of ladies of leisure who paid hundreds of yuan for a glass of wine in the prestigious Xintiandi shopping district or thousands of dollars for a designer handbag.

In an ideal world, most farmers aspired to serve customers who were willing to pay the prices that they charged because they appreciated the quality of their produce, including the taste, nutrition and health. Such consumers would be part of the social world of the ecological farmers, as they shared common beliefs about the qualities of ecological food and validated the choice that the ecological farmers made to start farming; whereas consumers, who chose not to spend money on ecological food were labelled by the farmers as bargain hunters or frivolous consumers who were neglecting their own and also their families' health and wellbeing.

In this chapter I have shown how the ecological farmers categorised and felt about consumers, and in doing so I have shed light on the tensions in the relationship between consumer and producer. The attributes they appreciated the most were what they saw as effort by consumers to consume what the farmers considered to be good food. The farmers appreciated those who made efforts to change their lives to take better care of themselves and their families by consuming ecological produce. These efforts included preparing home cooked meals instead of eating in flashy restaurants, spending money on ecological food instead of luxury goods such as designer handbags, and making the effort to purchase ecological produce despite the objections of other members of the household. Such customers demonstrated their

appreciation of the same qualities in food as the farmers. Shared beliefs about the qualities of food and a willingness to stay true to those beliefs were the common bond between the ecological farmers and their customers that undergirded their mutual appreciation. It was these people that had become distinguished in the eyes of the farmers and whom the farmers aspired to invite to become part of the alternative social world they aspired to build.



## **Chapter Seven**

### **Modernity and Aesthetics: Making Produce and Farms Appeal to Middle-Class Consumers**

Big Horizon Plaza's own farmers' market was held for the first time on a busy long weekend in August 2015 at Big Horizon Plaza. The canopies were neatly arranged in rows 2 metres wide by 8 metres. There were also electrical outlets for the farmers' appliances such as electric frying pans, soy bean milk makers (which Big Sister Wang used to make rice milk *mizhang*). There were two rows perpendicular to each other on two sides of the stage where a sound engineer with an audio control centre was located behind bales of hay provided by one of the farms that was participating. The farm also provided a tractor to park alongside the bales of hay. In front of the bales of hay a three piece band played acoustic folk tunes in the vein of Jack Johnson with Chinese lyrics.

The participating vendors including the ecological farmers had been told to find their stalls and report to the store room, an empty shop space in the plaza to collect wicker baskets, a large black board sign, a small black board sign and the white table cloth and gingham cover. Once collected the farmers would set about arranging their displays on the tables provided by the plaza. The gingham table cloths had to be placed at a 45 degree angle diagonal to the white table cloth and displays had to look neat and inviting. This was achieved by an inspection by plaza representatives, mainly Andrew, the venue's marketing manager. The whole event was well curated, with the specific purpose of attracting the affluent consumers in the surrounding area.

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In this chapter I discuss how the ecological farmers worked with commercial collaborators including advertisers, shopping centre managers and business people to reach affluent consumers who were willing to pay more for what they believed to be safer food. Working with different collaborators came with different expectations for ecological farmers such as aesthetical standards for the display of produce in markets and creature comforts for farm visitors. I show how these expectations from different collaborators reflected their different motives and perspectives on modernity. While commercial collaborators sought to continue on the path of conventional, market driven modernity, farmers such as Sister Wang, in contrast, were people who sought to leave that world behind in search of a different vision of modernity. However, in order to maintain the financial viability of their farms the farmers often needed to return to the world of conventional modernity to reach affluent urban customers by forging working relationships with commercial collaborators. I argue that ecological farmers such as Sister Wang and Old Zhao were straddling multiple modernities – conventional, consumption driven modernity and an alternative vision that does not involve material consumption. As I will show some farmers were able to switch between these world views as required while others struggled.

The ecological farmers were all aiming for the same customers, affluent customers with the willingness to pay four times or more than normal retail price for produce. With higher prices came higher expectations, and farmers were expected by their customers as well as collaborators to have more polished displays, uniforms and service with a smile at markets, while farms were expected to cater to the refined needs and expectations of affluent customers. This was in line with the aspirations of middle-class consumers, who had come of age during the reform era where retailers

became increasingly luxurious (Hanser, 2008). In her study of three different retail settings in Harbin, the capital of the North Eastern Province of Heilongjiang in China, Amy Hanser (2008) found that high end retail spaces used different techniques particularly in the training of sales staff to distinguish themselves from lower level retailers. Hanser coined the term ‘distinction work’ to describe the work performed by sales clerks in department stores to distinguish themselves from lower end retailers in underground markets that sold knock offs, either at the behest of store management or at their own initiative. Hanser’s concept of distinction work describes the work that farmers put into the aesthetic of their displays at farmers markets and also at their farms to attract affluent consumers, either of their own accord in the case of farms such as Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm, or in the case of farmers such as Camelia Grove’s Sister Wang due to pressures from collaborators such as Big Horizon Plaza.

Distinction work could take on several forms. Firstly, the presentation of produce and demeanour of farmers at the market. At Big Horizon Plaza market the farmers were expected to have neat and tidy displays of produce so as to distinguish them from the more common, sloppy displays at the average wet market. They also had to project a certain elegance. Irving Goffman’s (1959) idea of everyday performance is an apt framework for examining this situation, as the farmers were often being directed to perform in such a way as to appeal to the middle-class consumers that would come to Big Horizon Plaza. Not all farmers met this requirement, which contributed to the eventual dissolution of the partnership between Big Horizon Plaza and Our Piece of Ground, and Big Horizon Plaza’s decision to organise and run their own market.

Presentation and service were also important once consumers were on the farm, as affluent visitors often expected refinement and convenience. This sometimes led to expectations about the food and also about the length of time spent on the farm. This was particularly important on week days, when customers needed to be back in the city by a certain time. Some farmers struggled to get organised for farm visits, while others planned and organised a schedule of activities that was both diverse and professional. Facilities were also an important part of attracting affluent customers to farms, as they were an indicator of refinement and provided consumers with comforts such as refined seating and air conditioning. Distinguishing their farmhouse from the average perception of a peasant house was crucial to illustrate that they were superior to widely held urban perceptions about peasants' lagging behind in development in the reform era (Hanser, 2008: 15). The difference in tempo also reflected the different lifestyles and aspirations of the farmers, potential customers and collaborators. Some collaborators such as Old Yu did not mind the slow tempo and rudimentary facilities, while other collaborators, as we shall see were more critical.

I suggest that the different ways of presenting farms, planning farm visit activities and displaying farm produce were indicative of the different perspectives on modernity of different farmers and collaborators. Some farmers were more willing and able to conform to the requirements of collaborators such as Big Horizon Plaza and the advertising and events executive Karen, while other farmers disliked the artifice of such distinction work. The popular view of peasants as being unrefined coloured the views of marketing professionals such as Andrew, and led to their demands for refined from the farmers. Collaborators such as Andrew realised the potential profitability of ecological food, and felt that these profits could only be

realised by distinguishing the produce display from those at common wet markets, so as to justify to potential customers the higher price of ecological produce.

### **Dealing With and Appealing to Affluent Consumers**

As I have discussed earlier, the price of ecological farm produce in comparison to conventional produce has led many farmers to target the lucrative middle-class market in China. Appealing to these consumers, not only entails having packaging and presentations that appeal to them, but also being able to relate to them and achieving the standards that they expect when it comes to service in delivery or on farm visits. Some farmers were more comfortable dealing with demanding customers than others. One of the first things that Sister Wang shared with me, on a visit to her farm in the beginning of November for a day of festivities at the rice harvest was that she was horrible at customer service. She felt that she was not much good at meeting and greeting, unlike her sister. Her weakness at customer service caused problems with the occasional group of picky farm visitors.

Sister Wang's problems were exemplified by a farm visit that I helped with in December 2015. After the visit when Sister Wang dropped me back to the city on her way to a meeting, she complained about how demanding the customers were. She had just taken a call from the organiser of the farm visit. They were part of an affluent ladies group, who would band together to purchase large batches of quality food items such as imported beef from Australia. The ladies had organised a group purchasing activity to buy some of Sister Wang's ducks, resulting in a sale of 38 ducks. Their affluence was evident in the cars they drove and the brand name clothing they wore, as they arrived on the farm in two four wheel drive vehicles, one a Volvo and another a BMW. They wore designer brand garments such as Gucci

denim shorts and carried designer handbags, one of which was Louis Vuitton. The organiser had called Sister Wang to talk about payment and to give her feedback about the lunch they had on the farm. “Some of the ladies think that your price is a bit high. They want to pay RMB100 per head instead of RMB150.” Sister Wang felt underappreciated by these customers. Her feelings were understandable, as the ladies only hung out in the farmhouse without going into the fields and did not really ask any questions about Sister Wang’s farming practices. However, their grievances had some legitimacy, as the lunch had gone on for a leisurely three and a half hours, leading to a delay in the ladies’ return to the city.

Earlier that day, I had set out in the morning to meet Sister Wang outside a metro station at 7:30am to get a lift from her to Camelia Grove. As soon as we got there, a bit before nine in the morning, we were off to the local market on Chongming Island to buy some wild native crabs for the party of ladies. The crabs would add value and prestige to the farm lunch. By the time we got back to the farm it was already 10am and the time was ticking for the ladies’ arrival at 11am. The lunch was slow and disorganised, as Sister Wang flitted between the guest room and the kitchen, where she was helping to prepare the meal. The crabs were not ready until one pm. The ladies had intentionally arrived at 11am hoping for an early start so that they could have time to share a lavish feast before returning to pick up their children. They were appalled to find that the crabs, the main attraction of the lunch, had taken so long to get to the table, and they might not be able to get back to city in time to pick up their children from school.

The ladies also complained that the dishes were too oily and one in a pair of Gucci Denim shorts, black silk stockings and a pink hooded sweat top even trooped into the kitchen to do something about it. “Your dishes are too oily. Here let me stir

fry one,” she said, as her phone rang. She took the call, all the while stir frying a plate of leafy greens from the farm, holding her mobile phone in one hand and the spatula in the other. The meal had been prepared by the wife of the chief farm hand, from Chongqing, a distant relative of Sister Wang’s husband. Thus, the food was often oily and quite spicy, and perhaps ill-suited to the palates of local Shanghai customers. The oiliness of the food was symptomatic of this difference in taste and also of broader distinction between rustic country food and dishes prepared with less oil for the more delicate palates of urbanites that reflected their refinement. The farmhouse was basic, just a two room house with a single squat toilet, which was occasionally soiled by the muddy shoes of workers who had stepped in from the wet fields.

The women did not go out on the fields except for a cursory look on the edges before lunch. The majority of them complained that it was too sunny, “*tai shai*”, preferring to stay in the house instead. They did not take any interest in how the ducks that they had bought were reared, and how the husbandry techniques used by Sister Wang were different to conventional husbandry techniques. Ironically, Sister Wang’s life before she became a farmer was not that different to these ladies, as we saw she too took part in the purchase of some Australian beef. As a former military academy lecturer, and then CSL teacher, with a husband working in a managerial position in a state own telecommunications enterprise, Sister Wang’s household was quite affluent. She often talked about how she used to spend thousands of yuan on handbags or hang around the glamorous Xintiandi district with her friends, and told me that that was the lifestyle she had left behind. Yet she could not completely leave this lifestyle behind when many of her customers were from this moneyed class that sought the best of conventional modern consumption.

This farm visit to Camelia Grove by the group of ladies of leisure demonstrates that the problem some of the farmers such as Sister Wang have with their affluent customers is not so much a misunderstanding of what affluent customers want on the part of the farmers, but rather the inability to provide the service and facilities that affluent consumers such as these ladies of leisure expect. Sister Wang used to live this lifestyle, but chose to leave it behind, while customers and potential customers such as these ladies continued to live that way. As was the case with the eco farming movement in general, while many of the farmers left the city behind for rural life, their customers were mainly urbanites. Thus, despite leaving their lives in the city behind they still had to maintain an aspect of their urban identity to effectively deal with urban customers. Some farmers such as Old Zhao and the owners of Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm were more successful than others such as Sister Wang. This was evident in their different approaches to presentation outside the farm, as we shall see. However, we must first understand the expectations of the farmers' collaborators.

### **Aesthetic Expectations of Commercial Collaborators**

As well as knowing how to deal with customers, farmers were also expected to know how to visually appeal to affluent consumers in the market. The farmers' market organisers with a background in marketing such as Andrew and Karen were aware of the importance of image to attracting consumers. They were keen to impress upon the farmers the importance of aesthetic display to attract potential customers at the market. In their view aesthetics was an important way for the farmers' market to distinguish itself from conventional wet markets in Shanghai.



Our Piece of Ground market had its own branded table clothes and canopies, and during the summer months the farmers were given green T Shirts with the Our Piece of Ground logo in white. This was part of the efforts of Our Piece of Ground along with Andrew and Karen, who represented Big Horizon Plaza as a manager and consultant, respectively, to improve the presentation of the market and make it more attractive to the affluent middle class consumers in the neighbourhood. However, many farmers did not have the eye for detail to make sure that all table clothes were of the same distance from the ground to look uniform and tidy, that Andrew and Karen would have liked. This would eventually prove to be a bone of contention between the collaborators. But let us start from the beginning.

The market at Big Horizon Plaza started at 10am every day and finished at 5pm, and more often than not there would be people waiting for the market to start before the farmers had all their produce ready for display. For the first few months of my time in Shanghai, I would be at the plaza every Saturday morning around 9am to help set up, carrying the portable canopies, tables and chairs down from the store room on the second floor of the plaza. The farmers would arrive around 9:30am with their produce and helped to set up the market once they had carried their produce to the market from their cars. Even though there were no stores open at the plaza other than the bakeries, cafes and restaurants serving breakfast such as McDonalds and Starbucks, there were stalls selling fresh produce and meat setting up and operating outside the apartment complexes near Big Horizon Plaza by around 6:30am. These were the stalls where most of the retirees did their shopping since a 10am start would be quite late by their standards. Thus, there would sometimes be retirees wandering around the plaza and they would ask me if the wicker baskets, which were for farmers to display their produce, were for sale. Sometimes, consumers would walk

by and enquire about the price of produce before the farmers had the chance to finish setting up their stalls. Unlike another farmers market in Hong Kong where I volunteered on a weekly basis, there were no barriers at Big Horizon Plaza to prevent consumers from coming in early. In Hong Kong the barriers would not be lifted until the opening time of market, whereas in Big Horizon Plaza the thoroughfare was accessible any time. The result of this was a certain chaotic period between 9:30am and 10:30am, as the farmers scrambled to set up their display tables while consumers would enquire about and buy produce from them, leaving them with little if any time to organise their surplus produce and containers into a nice pile behind their display tables. The tables in the market were all put together adjacent to each other to form a rectangle with the farmers in the middle and consumers on the outside. The produce and other equipment would also be in the middle of the rectangle. The main complaints from centre management were about the state of the farmers' displays and the messiness in the middle of the rectangle. They felt that this made the farmers' market look too similar to wet markets and they wanted an aesthetic that distinguished the farmers market from wet markets.

Starting from November 2014, the organisers and the farmers at the Our Piece of Ground Market including Old Yu, Karen the owner of a marketing and events company that was responsible for events in the mall, and Andrew the marketing manager would hold meetings after each market, in the conference room of the centre management office at Big Horizon Plaza. The meetings were a forum for feedback and discussion between the farmers and the farmers' market organisers. Often the farmers did not have much to say and the main item on the agenda of the meetings would usually be feedback from Karen or Andrew about the state of market, with praise for farmers who were doing a good sales job as well as for those farmers

who made what Karen and Andrew considered to be appealing displays at the market. At one of the meetings Andrew the marketing manager admonished the farmers collectively, “You guys have let things become sloppy. The market is a mess and is starting to look like a common wet market. You’re squandering the opportunity that Karen and Old Yu have given you. If you don’t clean up your act you might be forced to move upstairs (to the second floor).” Andrew believe that this would be an effective coercive incentive for the farmers to change their practices since the farmers dreaded going upstairs where there was notably fewer customers. The second floor was a quieter part of the plaza with hardly any traffic, as hardly any consumers ventured up there, whereas the most prime location was the ground floor thoroughfare surrounded by restaurants with access to the Carrefour supermarket. There could be 20 passers-by in the space of three hours on the second floor compared to hundreds in the same space of time in the central thoroughfare. However, despite their unwillingness to go upstairs, there were still times when the centre had different activities that were set to take place in the main thoroughfare and the farmers were to be shifted to the upstairs location. This would lead to some consternation from the farmers but there was little that they or Old Yu could do about this, as the Our Piece of Ground Market were already given access to Big Horizon Plaza rent free.

As far as marketers such as Karen and Andrew were concerned refinement in aesthetics were important to prove that the farmers understood the needs of the potential customers with the income to pay the price for ecological produce. The goal was to show that the farmers were not backward peasants. Early on in my fieldwork in October 2014, Andrew had once confided in me that he felt that the farmers did not get the importance of presentation, as they were simple country folk, who lacked

the suzhi to understand how to present themselves in a way to succeed in the market. I found that this view was not entirely accurate given that the backgrounds of most of the ecological farmers. They were in fact people who had left behind middle-class lives to return to the land, as I have discussed in Chapter Three<sup>4</sup>. One morning at the market, Andrew came up to me and asked me if I had some time, as he wanted to show me something. He took me down to Carrefour, where he showed me how he wanted the produce to be displayed in the market. Andrew pointed to the produce displays as we walked through Carrefour, “See these displays, they’re neat and tidy. That’s all I’m asking for. If the farmers could have their displays organised neatly like this.” The vegetables were organised in produce bins and cartons with each type of vegetable in a different container that were spaced out, while the farmers’ displays at the market were often cramped and untidy by comparison. A couple of farms would often attract praise in the post market meeting when the Our Piece of Ground market was still operating at Big Horizon Plaza. A free range chicken farm, called Blessed Love, had a scrap book with photographs of their farm showing how their chickens were reared. They also made an effort to use local fabrics and textiles, and antique racks as part of their market presentation. At their stall in the farmers’ market, Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm had laminated press clippings on their table and also ran a video of a story from the local television station’s news report about the farm on a tablet device to show consumers. Their activities also reflected the professionalism of the couple. Karen, who often chaired the meetings would single out “Blessed Love Papa and Mama”, an affectionate term she used for the husband and wife who ran the farm, as well as Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm, as exemplars of how to make nice displays at the market. These farmers were using

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<sup>4</sup> At our final meeting before I left the field, Andrew distanced himself from these remarks when I raised them. He seemed to have arrived at an understanding of the background of the farmers.

cultural capital based on their sophistication to package their produce and farms in such a way as to make it appealing for their target consumers. These farms' way of displaying their produce meshed with the values of commercially minded organisers of markets like Karen and Andrew. Indeed, Blessed Love were one of four eco farms from the Our Piece of Ground group of farmers who were invited to the market organised by Big Horizon Plaza, as was Camelia Grove.

Where marketing and exhibiting was innate for farmers like Blessed Love and Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm, for others like Camelia Grove this was not the case. Sister Wang would often forget to put her name cards and promotional material on her table at the farmers' market. In winter when the farmers were no longer able to visibly wear the t shirts, they were issued with brown aprons with a smiley face pin badge, reflecting what Karen felt was a feeling of hospitality. Karen often mentioned the importance of engaged farmers, who provided service with a smile at the market. Old Zhao, being more marketing savvy, put a badge with his farm's logo on the apron instead of the smiley face. He remarked, "You know I took on board their advice and had these specially made."

In December 2015, Andrew arranged a meeting with me. He wanted me to show him some farmers' markets from overseas. I showed him some photos of farmers' markets in London and Hong Kong that I had regularly gone to, as well as photos I found on the internet. We discussed the direction he wanted to take the market. We went to a small shopping centre of independent boutiques, where he showed me some fit outs of stores using antiques. "See these baskets and sideboards? The farmers should all have things like these on their farms." As we walked along he noticed some black, cast iron shelves at a juice bar. "These look quite good," he said. "We can make some of these for the farmers." Andrew's vision came to fruition

when the shopping centre decided to hold its own market, without the participation of Old Yu and Our Piece of Ground. The market was run by the team at Big Horizon Plaza and Karen's team from her firm. In late August during the VJ day weekend celebrating the end of World War II and victory over Japan, the plaza arranged a farmers market, selecting certain farms from under the Our Piece of Ground umbrella, as well as inviting other eco and organically certified farms including a certified organic mushroom grower, and a farm that exports hydroponic produce to Japan, who provided a tractor for a central display along with some bales hay. The farmers were given wooden crates, woven baskets to display their produce, matching white table clothes and gingham covers. This contrasted with the more laissez-faire attitude to produce displays in the Our Piece of Ground market at the Altitude Art Centre, the venue that Our Piece of Ground relocated to after the split with Big Horizon Plaza, which I discuss later. For now, let us return to the farm, where a form of distinction work was expected to be performed in terms of facilities to appeal to affluent middle-class consumers.

### **Conforming to the Expectations of Commercial Collaborators**

In this section I discuss the ability and willingness of the farmers to conform to the expectations of collaborators such as Andrew and Karen. While some farmers struggled others were more able and willing to conform to aesthetic demands of collaborators, who wished for more distinction work in their self-presentation and also the presentation of their farms and produce. This could be a case of the farmers who had more cultural capital, leading to a better understanding of distinction work, as opposed to certain farmers who were reluctant to become too commercially

oriented, as they had moved past the life of middle-class consumption themselves. This was most evident in farm visits.

As I have discussed in Chapter Five, farm visits were an important way for farmers to form a bond with their customers and earn their trust. The presentation of the farm from clean farmhouses to refined facilities were crucial to appeal to affluent consumers with the income to pay for their produce. A well-designed schedule of activities indicated a level of care and thought about customers' experiences, which was appreciated by affluent customers looking for a weekend outing as well as an opportunity to get to know the farm where their food came from. The different abilities of different farmers to meet the demands of visitors was demonstrated by the cases of two farms, Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm and Camelia Grove. Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm chose to have a well-planned, tightly adhered to schedule of activities with a nice al fresco dining area whereas Camelia Grove had a less planned schedule.

Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm, a farm raising free range guinea fowl, was owned by a couple, with the husband working in the design industry. Their farm visit itineraries were well designed, starting with a farm tour once the whole group arrived, followed by tofu making using a traditional mill, then making wontons. Once the wontons were made they would be steamed as part of lunch, which would include vegetable rice [*cai fan*] cooked on traditional wood fired hearths. After lunch there would be free time and relaxation, followed by a session where guests, usually children, would get to make glutinous rice puddings which would then be put in steamers. While the puddings were being steamed, the children would be given kites to decorate, which they would fly in the fields surrounding the farm. The farmer would also bring a flag with the farm's logo along to the field, which would often get

photographed. By the time the fun in the fields was over, the steamed puddings would be out of the steamer and packaged ready for the guests to take home. This was a very richly filled schedule of activities, which, though not necessarily one hundred percent reliant on the farm's produce, as the pork for the wonton filling was not from the farm, was nevertheless more interesting than the basic activities offered on farm visits organised by some of the other farms where activities only extended to digging up produce such as sweet potatoes from the fields, and maybe slaughtering a duck or two, as was the case on Camelia Grove at the beginning of my field work. At Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm the main activity area was an outdoor canopy with long row of tables made from wood panels that could seat up to fifty people. The canopy area also had steam ovens, and two wood fired hearths. It was well kept and neat. There were men's and multiple lady's toilets in the farmhouse behind the canopy.

The facilities on Sister Wang's farm when I began fieldwork were rudimentary by comparison. She had a kitchen, with a laundry-cum-toilet behind it, which was adjacent to a room that served as an office as well as the dining room when there were visitors. Some visitors criticised her lack of facilities and were embarrassed to bring more customers. For example, Amanda felt that her facilities were too basic for her to bring a tour of high end customers including the general manager of a Fortune 500 company, to have a lunch at her farm. Thus, after Chinese New Year 2015, Sister Wang built a 20 metre by 20 metre greenhouse with an elevated wooden walkway and platform where she could put a couple of tables and chairs, at a cost of RMB135,000 (GPB15,855). There was also electrical wiring so guests could plug in stoves as part of her plan for them to pick produce straight from the vegetable patches in the greenhouse to cook in hotpots with a soup base made



from her ducks. The problem was that the greenhouse was very hot and humid during the summer months of June, July and August up until the passing of the mid-Autumn festival in mid-September. The heat and humidity also made it a breeding ground for mosquitoes, and there were several even on my last visit in early September.

Understanding this problem, Big Sister Wang, who also has a business installing air conditioners on the side, told me that she would arrange for the installation of an air conditioning system for the greenhouse. Even so, Amanda remained sceptical and maintained her schedule for the activity in late September. Boss Wu also wondered about the safety and liability issues of having wiring installed in the greenhouse. His comments about the rudimentary nature of Sister Wang's facilities before the construction of the greenhouse got back to Sister Wang and became bone of contention between him and the Wang sisters. Big Sister Wang refused to talk to him again after words got back to her about Boss Wu's criticism, as she felt that all he did was take free produce from her without promoting Camelia Grove.

Prior to the construction of the greenhouse and the increasing role of Big Sister Wang was in sales and customer service, Sister Wang's farm visit days were typically hectic affairs, with a struggle to prepare the dining room for the arrival of guests, while shopping for groceries and preparing for meals. Even when the greenhouse was built, there were times when farm visits would run over time due to the lack of planning. On a tour to Camelia Grove to help plant some flowers to make flower petal teas, the timing was fine in the morning leading up to lunch, but things slowed down after lunch as Sister Wang fielded inquiries from the six visitors about Camelia Grove's produce and spent that time selling salted duck eggs, rice and freshly harvested vegetables from the fields instead of planting flowers in the field. Nor was there equipment ready for the visitors to begin planting the flowers. In

contrast, Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm had a couple of helpers helping to prepare rice cake batter and filling in the morning for the visitors to make the rice cakes in the afternoon. Once the rice cakes were made, kites were brought out straight away for the children to decorate. This was a level of organisation that I did not see at Sister Wang's farm. There was even one occasion when they ran out of garlic and I had to go to a neighbouring farm to ask an old peasant lady if I could borrow some garlic, which ended up being garlic shoots. Unlike the owners of Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm, Sister Wang did not seem to carry out much advanced planning. This reflected the different beliefs of the different farmers, and that some were more in tune with the motives of the potential customers that they aspired to target while others were not as keen on making an effort to present themselves in a way that was in keeping with the expectations of commercial collaborators.

The different presentation approaches of farms reflected the different narratives that they were trying to form around ecological food. From a business, more specifically marketing perspective, one would have thought that regardless of their farming practices the ecological farmers with their cosmopolitan past lives would relate better with their customers than peasants, who hardly ever ventured to the big cities, if at all. However, I was surprised to find that this was not the case. The ecological farmers broadly fell into two categories when it came to relating to clientele – market oriented farmers who were always trying to come up with ideas to present their produce at the market and their farms during farm visits in a better light to consumers, and farmers that did not care as much about presentation. The latter group, a minority which included farmers like Sister Wang, often felt that presentation was not as important as the quality of the product. They believed that

this was a more genuine way of relating to consumers, and also that the quality of their produce would do the talking.

Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm epitomised the more conventional modernity oriented approach. It was owned by a couple in their thirties with the husband working in the design industry. While the farm was run on a day to day basis by the couple's parents, the couple were still responsible for designing farm activities for farm visits, as they possessed cultural capital that neither their parents nor the farm workers possessed. They took their design knowledge and capacity for research to learn from agro-food tourism in other countries and designed farm activities such as making traditional steamed puddings from rice flour as part of their activities. The husband also noted the quality of food packaging in Japan and Taiwan for snack foods, and hoped to learn from these countries. He had in fact tried to incorporate these ideas in the efforts they made to seal the plastic packaging for the rice cakes, which were taken away by guests as a souvenir of their farm visit. Their business savvy was evident in their use of media to increase their credibility at their market display. This type of display appealed to marketers such as Andrew and Karen.

Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm's approach was contrasted by Sister Wang, who had abandoned the trappings of her previously urban, middle-class lifestyle for a rural life and aimed to make her departure clear cut. She would often tell me that she only wanted to grow things and did not have any interests in selling to or maintaining relationships with customers. Sister Wang did not appreciate what she felt to be the artifice of conventional self-presentation such as having to put on a dress and make up to impress other people. She would frown whenever she was asked to put on a dress and tidy herself up for an occasion, and on such occasions, it was often Big

Sister Wang who would remind her to put a dress on and fix up her hair. Sister Wang's response would always be a resigned, "do I have to?" Her beliefs were such that she often wondered why her sister felt the need to put on makeup. "I don't think she needs it to be honest. We [humans] look much better in our natural forms". There was an element of take me as I am when it came to Sister Wang's self-presentation. She would always be forgetting her business cards, as she was not much for that sort of networking interaction. However, she still achieved successful sales at the market at Big Horizon Plaza, often coming near the top of sales when sales figures were exchanged at the post-market meetings, due mainly to the free samples that they offered. Camelia Grove's success showed that distinction work, while an important part of a strategy of de-emphasising the negative tropes of backwardness and poor hygiene in the countryside, was not the only factor crucial to the commercial success and economic viability of the ecological farmers at the market.

In a similar vein I was bewildered as to why Sister Wang could not channel aspects of her old life as a cosmopolitan white collar worker when dealing with white collar customers. This was particularly apparent when I attended a networking event for a funds management company and its customers with Sister Wang and Big Sister Wang. They were invited to attend as one of the sponsors that provided prizes for the company's customers. Sister Wang and Big Sister Wang had their dresses and high heel shoes on, and we were seated in the event conference room. "Go and mingle," Big Sister Wang told her younger sister, as Sister Wang sat sullenly on the chair like a child forced to eat their vegetables before dessert. In contrast, Big Sister Wang was making rounds in the room handing out cards and receiving some in return. She took note to exchange WeChat accounts with attendees who were willing to stay in touch. The elder Wang sister had a point. It did not look too good to have a sullen, stewing

farm owner in the midst of an event where gift packs of her farm's rice and salted duck eggs were being handed out. A lady sitting behind us had tried to initiate conversation. "Hi. So what do you do?" Sister Wang smiled politely in reply and did not say a word. I took her aside and admonished her, "Your sister's working hard to drum up new customers for the farm and you're sitting here sulking. That doesn't look good. You can put on a cheerful face and go back in or we should hang out outside and let your sister do her thing." On another occasion when she was about to visit a neighbouring farm owned by a wealthy businessman, who wanted her to give him some tips about how to grow herbs in a greenhouse, it was Sister Wang's older sister who reminded her to take a shower and put on a nice dress. Sister Wang's reaction was like a child being forced to abandon her favourite dress to put on a disliked outfit to please her grandmother. Sister Wang retorted that it was only dirt and that appearances should not matter, whereas Big Sister Wang and I knew this not to be the case, as commercial collaborators would attest they appreciated it when the farmers made an effort on their presentation.

Like Sister Wang, Little Su the manager of Clear Water Grain was not good at sales and customer service. Little Su studied design in university and wound up working for the farm, leaving behind a career path that could lead to white collar job and a middle-class lifestyle. As another farmer remarked, "Little Su prefers to talk to plants than people." I would often see her at the market tapping away at her phone as consumers walked passed her stall in the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market at Big Horizon Plaza. This was a marked contrast to the charming demeanour of Big Sister Wang. I talked to her once about how best to sell at the farmers' market and talked about Big Sister Wang's ability to draw consumers with compliments and charm. Little Su said, "When I'm out shopping I find that annoying, so I don't do

it.” Like Sister Wang, Little Su preferred to just grow things and work on the land rather than interacting with consumers in the market. On a visit to her farm when they were hosting some affluent, young couples, I was surprised at Little Su’s nonchalant demeanour. “Oh, let’s go dig some sweet potatoes out,” she said without conveying any of her passion for working the fields.

It was ironic that farmers who had chosen to leave behind their urban identities and swapped them for a rural identity had to resort again to urban forms of distinction work in order to relate to their customers who are mostly urban and middle-class. Those who did not draw as distinct a line between the rural and the urban tended to do a better job of presenting at the market, as they did not take this demarcation personally, and were therefore more accepting of their roles as economic actors in the market than Sister Wang and Little Su, who, having the wrong face work, could rub consumers the wrong way and risked losing them as customers. Fortunately, Sister Wang had her older sister to act as a surrogate for her in customer service situations such as during farm visits, at the market stall and on weekly deliveries, but for Little Su and Clear Water Grain Farm, it was obvious that they lacked a sales and customer service person with the right face work to relate to affluent consumers.

### **Suzhi and Fitting into Middle-class Spaces and Aesthetics**

The need to package and display products in the farmers’ market in a certain way, and the demand for refinement on farms are indicative of the gulf between rural peasants and urbanites in contemporary China both discursively and economically. The rural bumpkin or peasant carry several negative connotations in popular discourse, exemplified by the idea that peasants have low suzhi, which often place

them near the bottom of the social hierarchy among urbanites. This is illustrated in Yan Hairong's (2008) work *New Masters, New Servants*, which chronicles the experiences of migrant women from rural, who serve as domestic helpers in Beijing. Yan (2008: 42) notes that it has become somewhat of "a crude joke" for someone in the city to be called a peasant, as the term harbours negative connotations of backwardness and a lack of civility. Thus, it was felt by commercial collaborators such as Andrew that it would be best for the farmers to distance themselves from such discourses and present a more refined, corporate face that would appeal to middle-class white collar urban consumers who embodied and adhered to conventional ideas of modernity. The irony was that farmers who were found to be wanting were described as lacking *suzhi*, as they were showing a lack of understanding of the requirements of the modern market economy in China and the associated expectations of performance and presentation (Gamble, 2003; Kipnis, 2007).

The need to appeal to affluent consumers arises from the perception among many affluent consumers of the rural, country bumpkin, as what Mary Douglas (1966; also Sun, 2009) calls "matter out of place" in the context of their genteel upper class lifestyles in their gated communities and shopping malls. Furthermore, the premiums charged by the ecological farmers for their produce also necessitated packaging and presentation to show that their produce was worth the extra money that consumers were spending to purchase their produce. This was especially necessary, in the view of marketers and commercial collaborators such as Karen and Andrew, who felt they understood the affluent consumer aesthetic. Vegetables with dirt presented in a way that is similar to wet markets would lack the distinction to attract the dollar from the consumers.

As Li Zhang points out ‘middle-classness’ in China is performed (2010). Commercial collaborators such as Boss Wu, Andrew and Karen believed that in order to reach middle-class consumers, who are able and potentially willing to spend money on ecological produce, the ecological farmers need to be part of this performance as well as to help facilitate it through their packaging and self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). Performing correctly and looking the part is very important to attract the attention of these affluent consumers. As Amy Hanser points out, “Service organizations like department stores-especially those serving elite customers-engage in practices of organizational distinction-making” (2008: 9). Where Hanser focuses on the role of service staff in these organizations and their need to acknowledge the customers’ elevated status, here I suggest that the aesthetic expectations of the farmers reflect a need to conform to the aesthetic expectation of the consumers arising from their status and need for distinction. Commercial collaborators also felt that the presentation of the produce at the farmers’ market should reflect the higher price of the ecological produce compared to that of conventional produce. I suggest that distinction work is not only characterised by labour, but also aesthetics and presentation. In order to justify the higher price of ecological produce, collaborators such as Andrew and Karen felt that the farmers’ produce needed to be displayed in an elegant way.

In spaces such as shopping malls including Big Horizon Plaza, something rural is regarded as “matter out of place”, as much of what comes from the countryside is perceived to be inferior due to a lack of *suzhi*, and therefore inappropriate for a space that symbolises to the re-emergence of conventional, North Atlantic modernity in contemporary China. Several scholars have studied the relationship between the citizens of major urban centres such as Beijing and



Shanghai, and people from other parts of China, usually domestic helpers or factory workers (Sun, 2008; Yan, 2008). In China the main official discourse regarding population quality was that the nation was being held back by low quality, backward peasants in the countryside (Yan, 2008). Hairong Yan writes, “The post-Mao discourse of modernity thus produces the countryside both materially and ideologically as a wasteland stripped of state investment and inhabited by moribund tradition, with the two dimensions reinforcing each other. If Modernity and Progress reside in the city, and if the city monopolizes modern culture, then the countryside is the city’s emaciated other” (2008: 52). This trope of the countryside as backward was a label that hung over the ecological farmers even though the majority were back to the landers, who once lived middle-class lives in metropolitan Shanghai, as I discussed in Chapter Three. Collaborators such as Karen and Andrew felt that the farmers’ market in a modern space like Big Horizon Plaza had to erase any evidence that was most strongly associated with rural China and would remind the consumers of backwardness.

Ann Anagnost (2004: 190) points out that, “Suzhi’s sense has been extended from a discourse of backwardness and development (the quality of the masses) to encompass the minute social distinctions defining a “person of quality” in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle-class desire for social mobility.” The rural is regarded as being low *suzhi* and therefore needs to be educated by the urban as to what *suzhi* is, ranging from less oily dishes to neater and more elegant displays at the market. “At the same time, as economic reforms increased privatization and dismantled the institutions and the entitlements of state socialism, *suzhi* appeared in new discourse of social distinction and the discursive production of middle-classness” (Anagnost 2004: 190). This production of middle-classness is one that the

ecological farmers were expected to adapt to in spaces such as Big Horizon Plaza. Like the employers of domestic helpers in the cities, who felt the need to teach their rural helpers to become more sophisticated, and increase their *suzhi*, collaborators such as Karen and Andrew felt the need to teach the farmers how to market their produce at Big Horizon Plaza (Yan, 2008). For example, how to make their produce appeal more to people who engaged in gated consumption and to be more effective economic actors. This was evident in the way their stalls were inspected by Andrew and the staff looking after the market that Big Horizon Plaza ran themselves in August. Venue management's incentives for the farmers to cooperate included the provision of electrical outlets for the farmers to use electrical appliances such as the soy milk machine to make rice milk, which was not provided when Our Piece of Ground was running the market. A Guo and I had requested electricity multiple times during the National Day holiday week in October 2014 and our requests were never acted upon by centre management.

In his study of rural tourism, *nongjiale*, in the village of Fule outside of Beijing, Park Chun Hwan found that most farm guest houses tended to keep the form of the generic farmhouse while removing most "markers of rurality and rusticity", retaining only a few aesthetic markers such as dried ears of corn, chillies or a small vegetable garden. Squat toilets were replaced by modern flush toilets and modern beds brought in for the comfort of urban guests (2014: 532). Park suggests that this may reflect a belief among the farmhouse owners that even though tourists are looking for the authentically rural, "they will not tolerate a complete absence of modern comforts and hygiene" (Park, 2014: 533). He continues, "failures in inscribing sufficient markers of modernity into the space of the *nongjiayuan* [farmyard] involve all the negative cultural codes of rurality: dirty, absence of

hygienic notions, low in quality, lack of civilization, lack of culture, and so on” (Park, 2014: 534-535). However, Park found that even though some guests would complain about the over modernisation symbolised by these modern amenities, they would also complain about the lack of such facilities in other rural guest houses. I found the latter to be the case, as the lack of modern amenities became a barrier for ecological farmers who wanted to encourage more farm visits by the affluent urban clientele that they were targeting. This was exemplified by Boss Wu’s complaints about the rudimentary facilities on Sister Wang’s farm before Sister Wang built the greenhouse on her farm.

I suggest that the obsession of urban residents in China with cleanliness (Sun, 2008: 225) also applies to the presentation of produce at the farmers’ market. Sun points out that urban middle-classes in China have a fetish for cleanliness, which manifests itself to the point of not allowing dust from outside to enter the home. The middle-class urban resident’s desire for order manifests itself in their desire for security, privacy and cleanliness as well as in their constant complaints of their social ‘other’ as a source of threat to these values” (Sun, 2008: 226). Here Sun is referring to the domestic helpers as the social other, who are often migrants from provinces outside of Beijing that are viewed as backward. I extend this idea to a view of farmers, who are also perceived as rural by consumers. Dirt and insects on produce is a sign of a hygienic threat to these middle-class consumers. The notion that the goods from the countryside are matter out of place can be extended to include the farm produce with dirt because the dirt literally comes from the countryside which is perceived as a backward place. The way that the ladies who came to lunch talked to Sister Wang’s farm workers was also reflective of this mentality. When they criticised the dishes at the farm lunch as being too greasy and insisted on stir frying

the vegetables themselves, they were implicitly complaining that the peasant worker did not know how to cater to the delicate sensibilities of the urbanite, and that the peasant workers were unaware of standards of hygiene. The farmers faced a certain class based stigmatisation from collaborators who perceived them to be backward and from visitors who displayed their arrogance on the farm. These perceptions were often based on first impressions that the farmers projected with their appearance such as their clothing stained with dirt from the fields or lack of make-up in the case of female farmers such as Sister Wang, or when they drove their more modest minivans, which were often associated with tradesmen. The reluctance of Sister Wang to dress up for occasions such as meetings with potential commercial collaborators did not help to allay such prejudiced impressions. The irony was that the farmers themselves were from the same class of people who engaged in gated consumption. As was the case with Andrew many people only realised that the farmers were actually middle-class once they got to know them.

Businesses big and small, from stallholders in markets such as the ecological farmers to supermarkets selling certified organic food, all try to deploy tropes of the country that associate their produce with the positive aspects of the countryside such as purity and authenticity in different ways (Domingos, Sobral and West, 2014: 9-10). This is evident in the different approaches of the ecological farmers, Our Piece of Ground market and the market at Index Plaza. While ecological farmers such as Sister Wang tried to deploy their down home, salt of the earth rurality which conflicted with the more curated approach that commercial large business ethos people such as Andrew and Karen had, there were other farmers such as Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm that adhered readily to conventional notions of modernity in China. Sometimes these methods conflicted, leading to frictions between the

different collaborators at Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market and contributed to the eventual loss of Big Horizon Plaza as a venue for Our Piece of Ground.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown how farmers were expected to conform to middle-class aesthetic standards in order to be given a chance to promote and sell their produce in spaces such as Big Horizon Plaza frequented by middle-class consumers, who formed their ideal target market. The expectation of middle-class consumers also extended to farm facilities when these consumers visit the farms. The ecological farmers straddled a fine line between polishing their presentation and appealing to middle-class aesthetics, while maintaining the positive tropes of authenticity associated with the countryside. This balancing act is made all the more challenging by the narratives that on one hand the countryside is perceived by urbanites as a space where one can get the freshest produce (Klein, 2014), on the other hand the countryside represents backwardness and low *suzhi* practices such as lack of hygiene (Sun, 2008).

While some farmers preferred to put forward a more polished presentation, whether it be in the market or on the farm, others, such as Sister Wang, preferred a what you see is what you get approach and allowed their produce to speak for itself. If *suzhi* discourse is about disciplining the subjectivity of subjects to make them become successful actors in the post-Mao modernity project, as Yan (2008) puts it, and as perceived by the affluent, educated middle-class economic elites such as Karen and Andrew, ecological farmers such as Sister Wang and Little Su had clearly chosen to pursue an alternative path of leaving the modern city for the country to return to the land. Even so, farmers such as Sister Wang had upgraded their facilities

to be more approachable for middle-class urban clienteles with her greenhouse, and Little Su was already on a farm with a farmhouse designed by an artist.

As well as an expectation of awareness of middle-class aesthetic tastes in display spaces, *suzhi* also extends to having the right facilities on the farm to show that the farm is not just a backward peasant space. The presence of an appropriate space to host visitors is crucial for the formation of good impressions by consumers. The cuisine was also a factor, as we saw with the ladies of leisure who visited Sister Wang's farm. They found the dishes too oily and one even went in the kitchen insisting on stir frying the next dish of vegetables herself. Big Sister Wang later rectified this situation when the farm workers from Sichuan left and were replaced by local workers and a domestic helper from neighbouring Zhejiang province, who made dishes with less spice and less oil that better suited the palates of farm visitors, who mostly came from Shanghai.

The different face work performed by different farmers was also indicative of their different values. Some were more market oriented like Blessed Love and Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm, while other farmers such as Sister Wang and Little Su were more passionate about the land and growing produce were less market oriented and not as keen on marketing. They cared more about the ideals of eco farming and less about packaging and presentation, as they felt the façade of presentation to be unauthentic and pretentious in comparison to what they perceived to be the salt of the earth rural lifestyle. Yet still they needed to play the game to some degree in order to be viewed as legitimate in markets such as Big Horizon Plaza where they were under the surveillance of the marketing professionals such as Andrew and Karen, who felt that presentation was an important part of the distinction work that distinguished the farmers' market from wet markets. Managers

such as Karen and Andrew felt that the distinction was important owing to the price premiums for ecological produce in relation to conventional produce.

The ability and willingness of farmers to adhere to the schedule of middle-class urban lives also reflected their deviation from conventional modernity. While it may seem that farmers such as Sister Wang had forgotten how to do this, I suggest that it was a reflection of Sister Wang's commitment to her new lifestyle on the land. Sister Wang enjoyed this new identity in the same way that Little Su did. They both found that performances such as putting on the correct face work for the world of commerce to be pretentious. The practice of distinction work was uncomfortable for farmers such as Sister Wang because of its elements of performance that are the obverse of the authentic convivial social world that they were trying to create. Yet, in order to succeed in venues such as Big Horizon Plaza the farmers had to play the game whether they liked it or not, due to the differing view of marketers such as Karen and Andrew, who felt the need to partake in the urban pursuit distinction work. If they played by the rules set by managerial collaborators in their bid to create distinctions between the farmers' market and wet markets, the farmers would receive support such as electrical outlets, and the opportunity for access to a lucrative customer base.

Some farmers such as Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm and Blessed Love Farm tended to earn praise from collaborators such as Karen and Andrew for conforming to their aesthetic standards, while others such as the Wang Sisters and Little Su were attempting to depart from conventional modernity. However, despite their comparatively uncompromising attitudes, the Wang Sisters still aspired to be part of market that Big Horizon Plaza were running themselves, as did Stephen,

Little Su's boss. This contradiction was indicative of the farmers' straddling of multiple modernities.



## **Chapter Eight**

### **Old Yu: An Alternative Collaborator**

After one of the weekly Our Piece of Ground farmers' markets at the Altitude Art Centre, Old Yu invited me to his home for dinner. As we chatted, I could detect a note of self-doubt in his voice. He wondered if he was of any value to the farmers at the market, as he felt that all of his previous endeavours had not succeeded as he wished. Over the course of knowing Old Yu I had always encouraged him to be more daring. I felt that Old Yu's negativity only served to hold the farmers back rather than help them, as he wished to do.

When we had this conversation I was almost nine months into my fieldwork in Shanghai. By that point, I believed that activists like Old Yu were important collaborators to the farmers and also as organisers of alternative food networks in Shanghai. Old Yu's ability to form strong bonds with certain farmers such as Sister Wang and Old Zhao spoke to his personal integrity, which went beyond commercial imperatives, as they could have had opportunities to leave Our Piece of Ground and work with other farmers' markets or even directly contact Karen and Andrew. However, he still struggled to gain unconditional support from all of the farmers for the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market.

In this chapter I discuss the experience of Old Yu, the former environmental activist turned organiser of Our Piece of Ground market. It is activists such as Old Yu who are striving to bring change in the food system with the farmers' produce rather than the farmers themselves, as they are central to the creation of alternative food networks such as purchasing cooperatives and farmers' markets. The Oxford Dictionary defines an activist as, "A person who campaigns to bring about political

or social change” (Oxford Dictionaries). Organiser activists such as Old Yu had the ideology and a clear vision for an alternative to conventional modernity with his aspirations for environmental sustainability. Old Yu’s vision for modernity was concerned with environmental protection, increasing food safety and creating an alternative to the conventional food system rather than factors such as commercial success and the resulting profits. Unlike Karen and Andrew, Old Yu’s background as an environmental activist and his work on the farmers’ market since 2011 lent him legitimacy as an activist for safe food and could have served to legitimise the ecological farmers’ claims about their produce. Furthermore, Old Yu’s view of alternative social worlds is more similar to that of the farmers than the commercial collaborators. He and the farmers shared the goal of building a community of interest around passion for produce grown without synthetic inputs. However, this similarity in outlook did not necessarily guarantee the cooperation of the farmers.

I argue that whether the farmers choose to collaborate with activists depends as much on economics as it does on a shared worldview. The farmers rely on collaborators to reach consumers they aspire to target, and one set of collaborators are activists who believe in spreading the message of ecological produce to the wider public. Despite, sharing a common interest in creating alternative social worlds around produce grown without the use of synthetic inputs with the farmers, the activists are also under pressure from the farmers to be effective collaborators in promoting the interests of the farmers. Luetchford and Pratt’s (2014) study of organic produce cooperatives in Spain demonstrates the importance of shared values in the working relationship of the organisation. In their case there was shared anti-capitalist sentiment. The co-operatives are enabling organisations (Kneafsey et al, 2008) in that they connect the farmers to far off markets and help them with their goal of making a

living. However, there can also be tensions between farmers and their collaborators as evidence in Peter Luetchford's (2008) study of coffee cooperatives in Costa Rica. He found that the tensions arose from the farmers' questioning the value that the cooperatives bring to them, as they do not have a clear understanding of what goes on after the coffee leaves their farms (Luetchford, 2008). This shows that respect between collaborators is a matter of efficacy. Similarly, Old Yu loses the farmers' respect when his efficacy is diminished. Some of the ecological farmers monitor the effectiveness of activists to increase business, and would either stop working with these activists or put less priority into serving their needs, if they felt that working with these activists was not profitable. Indeed, as Clare Hinrichs (2003) notes there is an element of self-interest when farmers attend farmers' markets. Thus, keeping farmers satisfied that their interests were being served and maintaining relations with them was a challenge that activists faced. Furthermore, the farmers have their own means to find markets, meeting directly with collaborators from gated communities without activists such as Old Yu. Thus activists are under even more pressure to prove their efficacy to farmers.

The other difference between activists such as Old Yu, and more commercially oriented collaborators such as Karen and Andrew at Big Horizon Plaza was that he did not pressure the farmers to change too much to have a cleaner aesthetic at the market as I discussed in Chapter Seven. Old Yu took the farmers for who they were and did not ask them to become more polished in presentation, as he shared a common critique of conventional modernity. This *modus operandi* reflected in Old Yu's beliefs, which went beyond the limited metrics commercial success, which is evident in his background.

I begin by chronicling Old Yu's friction with his commercial collaborators at Big Horizon Plaza and the farmers who ignored him when he changed the site for the farmers' market. In order to understand Old Yu's point of view I will shed light on how he came to organise farmers' markets in Shanghai and his inspiration for his worldview. I then discuss his criteria for selecting farmers to participate in the farmers' market and the farmers' ability to choose whether or not to participate in the farmers' market. I suggest that the farmers' choices show that the farmers are just as motivated by economics as they are by ideology.

### **Finding an Effective Farmers' Market Site: Frictions between Organisers of the Farmers' Market, and the Farmers**

The call came when Old Yu, Tommy Zhang (an occasional volunteer at the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market and friend of Karen's, who was a tennis coach), Little Chen, a friend of Old Yu's who was collecting seeds for a seed bank, and I were visiting Big North Farm, a potential farm for the farmers' market in early January 2015. We were being shown one of the fields when Old Yu took a call from Karen. According to Old Yu she told him that she, and by proxy Big Horizon Plaza, wanted 80% control of Our Piece of Ground, and that if Old Yu refused her terms, Our Piece of Ground's days at Big Horizon Plaza would be over. Old Yu refused to budge. Thus ended Our Piece of Ground market's time at Big Horizon Plaza, and began Old Yu's search for a new site for the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market. This would lead him to the Altitude Art Centre, a plaza specialising in art supplies with some restaurants, a cinema and an art gallery. When I asked Karen for her side of the story she would only remarked cryptically, that she felt that Old Yu had not fulfilled his responsibility at the Our Piece of Ground market in Big Horizon Plaza. I

could not help but feel that dissatisfaction with the farmers' presentation at the market was a significant part of the "responsibilities" that Karen was referring to, as it was a constant item on the agenda at the post-farmers' market meetings at Big Horizon Plaza.

Finding sites for the farmers' markets was one of the tasks of organisers like Old Yu. The ability to find a good site for the farmers' market that satisfied their needs was a challenge for farmers' market organisers. The site had to have the commercial requisites, and more importantly, willing commercial collaborators. Once those criteria were satisfied the farmers' market could begin operation. The best sites were those with good foot traffic and consumers with a high intention to purchase produce, to be prepared at home. According to Old Yu the point was to have the market where consumers had intentions of purchasing ingredients for their meals, and the key sign was a supermarket. Old Yu believe that consumers who did not intend to purchase food could not be converted to the purchase of ecological food, as they had no intention of purchasing any food conventional or not. However, for a farmer's market such as the Our Piece of Ground market to have continuity there had to be a good working relationship between all the collaborators in the site. The end of the collaboration with Big Horizon Plaza would spell troubled times for Old Yu.

One of the main challenges for farmers' market organisers was that the farmers would often choose whether to attend a market depending how lucrative they felt that the space could be. When Our Piece of Ground market moved to the Altitude Art Centre after they split with Big Horizon Plaza the market struggled to generate custom, and several farmers stopped attending the market. More over the new space was charging a fee of RMB30,000 (GPB2,500) per year. As a result of this fee from the venue Old Yu started to charge the farmers an annual fee of RMB5000 (about

GBP592) per annum to take part in Our Piece of Ground markets, after consulting with one of the farmers, who had a broader view of the industry as a whole rather than just considering his own farm.

The lack of success for the farmers at the new venue, the Altitude Art Centre, was leading to difficulties for Old Yu, as the centre management complained to him about the lack of farmers. ““They’d say ‘is this all?’” Old Yu said in frustration when I asked how things were going and whether the market could receive more support from centre management. As one farmer who withdrew from Our Piece of Ground remarked, “I just didn’t like the prospects at the Altitude Centre site. So I withdrew from Our Piece of Ground.” Instead he chose to go to another farmers’ market, exclusively, and even then he complained about the lack of traffic in the new site for that market, which was in a multi-story shopping centre. Many of the other farmers shirked their fees, while staying in the Our Piece of Ground circle, and chose not to attend their markets. Old Yu complained about them not answering phone calls from him or responding to his WeChat messages. He remarked disappointedly, “I’ve called these people several times and left them messages on WeChat, all of which have been ignored. You really find out who your friends are in times like these.” To add further insult to injury to Old Yu, a number of farmers were starting their day at Crystal Bay Mansions, an apartment complex opposite Big Horizon Plaza in the morning before heading to the Altitude Art Centre. The mini farmers’ market at Crystal Bay Mansions ran from eight o’clock in the morning to twelve noon, while the Altitude Art Centre started at one in the afternoon and finished at five. The distance between the two sites was roughly 5 minutes by car, so it was easy for farmers to go to both. Were it not for that, Old Yu may even have had even fewer farmers attending the market at the Altitude Art Centre.

The problem with the Altitude Art Centre was that the people frequenting the centre were there to catch an exhibition in the centre or a movie in the Cineplex rather than to buy groceries. Even the farmers who had the most successful stall at the market, which sold soy products such as home-made tofu and the ever popular soy milk, which they advertised as organic at RMB5 (58 pence) per cup (which made it a good deal considering a coffee at one of the coffee shops was RMB20-30 (GBP2.30 to 2.50) per cup depending on the store), felt that the customers were “just passing through” and were “not long term customers”. There were usually one or two thousand passers-by for the duration of the market, but not many consumers of ecological produce with only maybe seventy to eighty of the passers-by being farmers’ market customers. This was in contrast to the mornings at Crystal Bay Mansions, where there were only about one hundred and forty to one hundred and fifty passers-by on average, with maybe 20-30 customers. Old Yu remarked, “The farmers are very pragmatic. They won’t participate in a market if the business at the site is not good.” In order to attract farmers to the market Old Yu would have to find lucrative sites.

It was the shopping centre opposite the Altitude Art Centre, a high end shopping centre that had a high end supermarket. Old Yu had explored the possibility of trying to get a space there, but found the fee to be prohibitively expensive, allegedly RMB8000 per stall each time as opposed to the RMB30,000 per year that the Altitude Art Centre was charging and the rent free terms at Index Finger Plaza. Old Yu also found a site at a sustainable design company, which would take place once a month on Fridays, there would be occasional workshops at the events about

sustainability and food at the venue, and the farmers' would be invited to sell their produce on such occasions.

The problems with the market at the Altitude Art Centre were in contrast to the success at Big Horizon Plaza. Like the Altitude Art Centre, Big Horizon Plaza was also close to several gated communities. However, its main focus was as a retail and leisure plaza with a range of retail brands such as Uniqlo, as well as restaurants such as Pizza Hut, Wagas<sup>5</sup> and independent eateries serving a variety of cuisines, which made it an attractive place for middle-class families in the neighbourhood to spend their weekends. More importantly, Big Horizon Plaza had a Carrefour supermarket, which also signified the plaza as a place where families could come to purchase groceries. Thus, unlike Altitude Art Centre which did not have a supermarket, there was already intentionality among consumers going there to buy ingredients to prepare at home. The closest supermarket to the Altitude Art Centre was a branch of Ole Supermarket, a large high end supermarket with a healthy section of packaged, certified organic produce, across a busy main road in a neighbouring shopping centre. Old Yu admitted this to me when he remarked to me that Big Horizon Plaza was more successful because there was a supermarket there and consumers went there with the intention of buying food.

As we have seen having a lucrative site was important to attracting farmers. Losing a lucrative site could also lead to the loss of collaborative farmers for activists, as the farmers valued efficacy. Even though Old Yu did not put as much emphasis on displays, which put less pressure on the farmers, many of the farmers valued economic efficacy. I suggest that Old Yu's lack of concern about commercial issues and lack of commercial savvy is very much the cause of his conflicts with

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<sup>5</sup> Wagas is a chain of cafes opened by an overseas Chinese entrepreneur from Australia <http://www.wagas.com.cn/>.



commercial partners such as Karen and also jeopardised his relations with some of the farmers. In order to understand the reasons for his lack of commercial savvy we must first understand Old Yu's background.

### **From Environmentalist to Vegetable Seller**

In this section I discuss Old Yu's background. I shed light on his journey from environmental activist to farmers' market organiser and his motivation for embarking on this journey. I show that his motives are very much altruistic and reflect a departure from the reliance on institutions in the food system, which he feels have failed.

Prior to becoming a farmers' market organiser, Old Yu was a part time environmental activist working in antipollution protests and court cases in greater Shanghai as part of an ENGO including a successful case against a manufacture that supplied to Timberland. He was emboldened by the Tianmen demonstrations which he witnessed as a teenager. "It was inspiring to see these people speak out against problems," he said. Old Yu was critical of the direction of Chinese society following the opening up reforms. He lamented the rise of Deng Xiaoping, "Ever since the opening up reforms people have become more selfish. More and more people are just in it for themselves." Such critiques put him at odds with the commercial ethos of collaborators such as Karen and also at odds with the actions of some of the farmers.

Old Yu left the world of ENGOs behind to pursue ecological food, as he felt that the polluters were just moving to other parts of China after being expelled, and wanted to do something with a longer term impact. Furthermore, his role in ENGO court actions against local governments had placed him on the watch list of local authorities. Old Yu told me that he had been invited to have tea with people he

presumed to be public security officials and had on another occasion been followed home late at night by men in a car while he was taking a taxi. He felt that targeting food production was a good way to be less controversial in the eyes of the authorities. After leaving the ENGO old Yu started the Shanghai Vegetable Cooperative (*Shanghai Cai Tuan*) before setting up his first farmers' market. Our Piece of Ground was his second farmers' market, which he set up after splitting up with his previous partners.

Many people including certain farmers and others such as Andrew, the marketing manager at Big Horizon Plaza, who dealt with Old Yu felt that he did not have much business acumen. This was a reflection of Old Yu's personality, work experience and more importantly his motivations for setting up the farmers' market. He was formerly a lower level IT worker for the local district government in a part of Shanghai and position that did not require much entrepreneurial savvy such as marketing awareness. His introverted personality also made him less capable of pitching and presenting to a business audience in a confident assertive way. He once told me, "I'm an introverted person. My son is like that as well and he gets picked on at school, like did I." I was surprised that someone with this wealth of experience could be lacking self-confidence. This was evident to me when I went to the first meeting with the events manager at Altitude Art Centre, when it was still only a potential site for the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market after it had been forced out of Big Horizon Plaza. I was expecting to go up to their board room and see Old Yu pitch Our Piece of Ground's values to the manager and his team on a PowerPoint presentation, instead he just arrived at the meeting with a notebook and a pen. The site manager came down to see him outside the centre and they chatted informally outside the building, not even over coffee or tea. Old Yu did not tell the site manager

what the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market would offer to Altitude Art Centre, instead he made an appeal to the manager saying, "I'm sure your company would be willing to help an organisation like ours' that is doing it for ecological reasons". To be sure Altitude Art Centre had a small crop of rice plants on the outside, but at the end of the day it was still a commercial venue, hosting exhibitions such as one about the history of the Transformers for several weeks with loud pop music and female models in tight fitting camouflage shorts and white tank tops. The incongruity spoke to Old Yu's lack of profit motive and disinterest in economic rationales. After about a month at the Altitude Art Centre I noticed that many consumers went to Altitude Art Centre for leisure including catching an exhibition or a movie in the Cineplex and then coming down for a meal in one of the restaurants or a coffee in one of the cafes in the mall. I found a pattern where the most traffic coincided with the times right before films would start or right after films as people were leaving the mall. When I suggested to Old Yu that he should think about the behaviour of consumers at the Altitude Art Centre and their timings, giving him the example of noting when films ended in the cinema to prepare for a rush of traffic, he chuckled. When I asked him why he was laughing, he said that he never thought of that.

Old Yu had a humble, affable everyman quality. He did not have a personality that would fill a room. Instead he was low key. For example when I tried to tout his credentials with a bit of hyperbole when we were at a meeting with members of the Green Shanghai Club at New York University Shanghai, he shrugged it off, sheepishly. He was not given to the bluster of business men or the smoothness of a salesman on a pitch. He did not project charismatic leadership. He was not one to meet, greet and glad hand VIP's at the market, preferring to stay in the background and take photos and chat with close associates instead. His friends,

who could see the differences between Old Yu's beliefs and his more commercially oriented collaborators would say that Old Yu had the heart, but not the ability (*ta you xin danshi buneng gan*). Andrew was one of those who had this opinion and despite the split from Big Horizon Plaza, he still remained on good terms with Old Yu. When I recounted Old Yu's pitch to Altitude Art Centre to Andrew, months later, over a farewell dinner when I was about to leave the field, Andrew laughed and said, "Your heart probably sunk to the floor, didn't it?" I admitted to Andrew that I was indeed embarrassed when I saw Old Yu's pitch, or lack thereof, to the management of Altitude Art Centre.

In the aftermath of losing their site at Big Horizon Plaza Old Yu began to question his position and what to do next. After the last farmers' market at Big Horizon Plaza in February, we were all invited to attend a meeting. There was a meeting at the conference room of the sustainable design company where Teacher Yang was the manager. It seemed obvious to me that Old Yu's value was his background in environmental activism, as an endorsement by a former environmental activist could lend the ecological farmers a much needed air of legitimacy in the market place and represent them as an environmentally friendly alternative. Old Yu did not seem particularly keen to put his environmental protection credentials to use to legitimise the farmers in the eyes of sceptical consumers. It was as though his previous encounters with government authorities had left him with a desire to maintain a lower profile and downplay his background in environmental activism.

Sometimes I felt that the farmers would have been better served with a more outgoing advocate, but many others who had more business acumen were pushing the farmers to conform to certain demands on presentation as I discussed in Chapter Seven. On the other hand Old Yu made no such demands of farmers. There was not a

person with resources and ability, who believed in what the farmers were doing and would promote them as they were. Old Yu relied on volunteers of varying reliability to help him at the farmers' market with tasks such as carrying the tables, table clothes, chairs and canopies to the site and setting up the canopies. Most of the time the farmers had to also step in themselves to help set up the market. By July 2015, when I had spent ten months in the field, Old Yu would occasionally remark to others that I was the best and most reliable volunteer that he had. Old Yu's most important quality in the eyes of the farmers that still worked with him by the time I left the field was that they regarded him to be a good person, "*ta ren hen hao*" (he is a good person), was the common refrain about Old Yu among the farmers at Our Piece Of Ground market.

### **Selecting Farmers who need the help**

Old Yu's motives, specifically his commitment to environmental protection was most evident in the way that he selected farms to participate in the farmers' market, or as he would put it, selecting "which farms to help". Old Yu was strict about the type of farm that he wanted in his market. He was mainly focused on helping smaller farms that would really need his help, and was less interested in helping larger farms that had more resources to market their produce and would visit each farm personally to observe their operation. This was exemplified by his visit to Big North Farm.

Big North farm was larger than the farms of farmers who were regulars at the Our Piece of Ground market at 300mu as opposed to a maximum of 100mu. The farm had sections for organic produce, which was according to the owner awaiting certification from authorities in Beijing who he was talking to, as well as sections growing no public harm produce. The farm also kept a small herd of goats as well as

a flock of ducks. To put it into perspective this farm was almost the same size as the combined size of the farms I discussed in Chapter Three – Pearl Bay Farm, the Wang Sisters' farm, Old Zhao's and Clear Water Grain Farm, which were a total of 330 mu combined. An intern on the farm had contacted Old Yu at the market to invite him to visit the farm. We arrived at the farm around noon. The farm was owned by an entrepreneur who worked in infrastructure construction on Chongming Island. The farm land was located opposite the office buildings along with a warehouse. The size scope of the operation was unlike anything I had seen from the other farmers. Big North Farm had a separate parking lot that could take over ten cars. Opposite parking lot there were some red brick buildings that included offices, a workers' cafeteria, function rooms for entertaining guests, as well as guest rooms for their members. The farm land was on the other side of the small road. Our party comprising of Tommy, Old Yu and Little Chen along with a farm intern from the agriculture department at Jiaotong University, who was studying agroecology.

Despite the pitch put on by Big North Farm, Old Yu was still able to maintain an objective distance when assessing the viability of having the farm at Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market. Old Yu was selective of farmers who could participate in Our Piece of Ground farmers' markets. His selection criteria were based on principles such as the size of the farm, the presence of the farm owner on the farm and personal inspections of the farm to check their soil quality and whether they used synthetic chemicals and fertilisers. He also rejected farms such as Big North farm in accordance to other criteria. I asked Old Yu about the decision not to include the farm.

*Old Yu:* I think they're a bit too commercial.

*Researcher:* How so?

*Old Yu:* I'm worried that they will aggressively undercut the prices of the other farmers.

*Researcher:* Are you also worried that they might try to pass off their no public harm produce as being ecological?

*Old Yu:* That too.

Old Yu also had standards about the intermingling of no public harm produce and organic produce plots, which did not sit well with him. On the basis of these concerns the farm was not invited to participate in the farmers' market.

None of the farms at the market were allowed to use synthetic fertilisers, herbicides or pesticides, and Old Yu would periodically go and inspect the farms. I followed him on several trips during January of 2015. On his visits Old Yu would talk to the farm workers, feel the soil and smell it, and look at their systems for growing produce. He claimed that he could tell if there had been synthetic fertilisers in the soil by smelling it and also by handling the soil sense the density. Later when he organised field trips to the farms as part of Our Piece of Ground's activities, he would also take water samples to be tested by old friends of his, who still worked in ENGOs. This was not just a matter of rhetoric or show, as standards were upheld and actions were taken against farms who did not meet the standards. Earlier in the year Old Yu had suspended a farm from the farmers' market when he found out that they were using synthetic fertiliser. "I asked the worker to show me what they were using and when the worker proudly brought the bottle out to show me. I told the farm owner that this was not allowable, as it was synthetic," Old Yu said.

Unlike the managers at Big Horizon Plaza, who included a fruit seller selling exotic fruit on the October National Day Weekend even though there was no evidence of how the fruit was produced, as it was felt that they would draw crowds to

the market, Old Yu had criteria other than commerce for the farmers he selected to be part of the farmers' market. Old Yu chose the farmers that upheld his ethos of non-use of synthetic inputs and also based on his ethos of helping those farmers, usually small farmers growing things ecologically, who needed his help. Thus, he preferred not to bring in larger farms that would compete unfairly with smaller farmers. On the other hand farmers could also choose whether or not to participate in the farmers' markets. It is to this issue that I will turn to next.

### **The Farmers' Choice to Participate or Not**

For the farmers' who participated in the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' market the market was one of many promotional and distribution channels that they could choose from. They could choose to go to Old Yu's former market or they may have to stay on their farms to receive visitors, as most farm visits would take place on weekends, sometimes on the same day as the farmers' market. Unless the farmers had extra help on the farm they would have to send a surrogate to the market to look after the stall otherwise they would not be able to make it. After Our Piece of Ground was kicked out of Big Horizon Plaza I talked to the farmers about what would happen if Big Horizon Plaza decided to organise a market themselves and contact them directly. I asked them specifically where their loyalties would lie.

The farmers were not obligated to be at Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market, and only needed to let Old Yu know whether they would be in attendance on the week of the market. Some weeks there would be eight farmers at the market, some weeks there would be ten, and sometimes even twelve. Every week Old Yu would send out a reminder on WeChat to the Our Piece of Ground group chat, which all the farmers' and super fans of the farmers' market were members of, calling for



participants in the farmers' market to register informally in the group. Sometimes the farmers would take their time to register for farmers' markets, which made it difficult for Old Yu to plan and promote the farmers' markets with things such as produce lists to alert consumers about what was available. There were weeks when Old Yu had to beg farmers to go to the market including the week in August during the Chinese equivalent of Remembrance Day in 2015, when Sister Wang and Big Sister Wang were invited to a state farm to help them with entertaining some retired navy personnel. I went along with the Wang Sisters as well, and Old Zhao was also busy that day. There were only two stalls at the Our Piece of Ground farmers' market in the Altitude Art Centre that week. Later that month when Camelia Grove was invited to attend the market that Karen and Andrew were running at Big Horizon Plaza, Big Sister Wang sent a surrogate, a long-time customer to man her stall at Our Piece of Ground. Thus maintaining a separation between producer and consumer at Our Piece of Ground, and closing the relationship at the Big Horizon Plaza market, which was run by people who did not care about the distance between producer and farmer the way that Old Yu did.

The farmers that did go to the farmers' market at Altitude Art Centre were often those who already had reason to be in the city or had the resources, as was the case with Pearl Bay Farm to have stalls at multiple farmers' markets. On Saturdays there was also a market in the western part of Shanghai in Gubei run by another farmers' market Good Farm the former organisation that Old Yu departed from running from 10am until 3pm, while the market at Altitude Art Centre ran from one in the afternoon until five in evening, sometimes stretching longer at the discretion of the participating farmers. Thus, farmers were pulled in multiple directions. With sufficient resources farmers could go to both markets, otherwise other factors such as

profitability and convenience would come into play. The lack of business at the market in Altitude Art Centre combined with the fees made some farmers choose the other site, which was free of charge. For other farmers such as Big Sister Wang and Old Zhao, who already had a market in the morning at Crystal Bay Mansions going to the market at the Altitude Art Centre was a matter of convenience, as it was literally seven or eight minutes down a busy road by car. Were it not for the fact that they were already in the same part of town and had produce to sell, these farmers may well have chosen not to show up at the Altitude Art Centre, either. The attitudes of farmers toward Old Yu were best exemplified by the actions and thoughts of the Wang Sisters. Sister Wang was unequivocal in stating her loyalty and support for Old Yu, as she admired his courage. It also fitted in with her maverick tendencies as we saw in Chapter Three. On the other hand the elder Wang Sister was more calculating in her decision. When I asked if she would rather be at Big Horizon Plaza for the market that they would be holding in September or at the Our Piece of Common Ground market Big Sister Wang replied, “Of course I’d rather be at Big Horizon Plaza.” Ultimately, their decision to stay on Chongming and entertain a potential commercial collaborator was most revealing about where both of the Wang Sisters stood with regard to their position on Old Yu. Economics was the key factor in that decision.

For Our Piece of Ground the key to attracting farmers to the market was to find a site that the farmers found to be economically attractive. With the right traffic and the right consumers coming through with the intention to purchase food. These metrics were based on commercial realities rather than a shared belief in the constitution of social worlds or a common desire for a different form of modernity. Indeed many of the farmers were keen to take part in the market that Big Horizon

Plaza were running themselves. Hearing that I was having dinner with Andrew the week before the market, a farmer asked me to see if I could let them know if they were invited, whereas Old Yu had to ask farmers if they were participating each week.

### **Activists: The Campaigners in the Marketplace for the Ecological farmers**

Activists such as Old Yu were advocating for systemic change and trying to facilitate it through their actions. Old Yu had a passion for environmental sustainability, and eco farming as a solution to the problems in China's food system and was trying to create change. His vision were greater than most of the farmers who were mainly concerned with growing safe food for themselves and their loved ones, and selling the surplus in the market place.

Old Yu was advocating for change at a more macro level than the ecological farmers, and was looking to group them together under the umbrella of a single organisation to sell to consumers. Unlike the commercial collaborators, I discussed in Chapter Seven, he did not push the farmers to change their aesthetic to increase their appeal to the middle class. He took the producers as they were and added a layer of promotion on social media and a venue for them to sell their produce. The lack of emphasis that Old Yu put on aesthetics is indicative of how his beliefs and motives differ from those of commercial collaborators who see ecological produce as a product with the potential to be profitable. Where Andrew and Karen saw the potential of the farmers' market to draw traffic into Big Horizon Plaza and therefore increase plaza revenue as it would attract more shoppers to the plaza, Old Yu saw ecological produce as a way to reduce pollution and make food safer in China. The differing visions of modernity reflected very different aspirations about China's

future, where Karen and Andrew adhered to the path of conventional North Atlantic modernity, Old Yu aspired for a more altruistic vision of modernity based on environmental movements.

It is activists like Old Yu who were allowing alternative producers like the ecological farmers to change the food system by taking a more macro view of the market for ecological food and presenting the ecological farmers with opportunities to promote and sell their produce. Old Yu was helping the ecological farmers to campaign and spread their message that safe food, grown in ecological ways was available to all consumers, who are willing to pay the price. He was seeking to create a community of interest linking consumers to farmers who grew food without synthetic inputs, while collaborators such as the Big Horizon Plaza were trying to make the ecological farmers an alternative in the open market by repackaging them, and eventually one of several activities that occupied the central thoroughfare in the shopping centre rather than a permanent fixture. Old Yu allowed farmers' such as Sister Wang to be themselves and embrace their new identities as back to landers. He did so by providing the farmers with a platform that did not place as many aesthetic demands on them as parties such as Karen and Andrew at Big Horizon Plaza.

Unlike Karen and Andrew who saw the farmers as fungible producers to be rotated in and out of farmers' markets at Big Horizon Plaza, Old Yu believe that it was crucial for the farmers to be at the market even though he did not have the power to ensure their continued presence every week. As far as he was concerned the most important aspect of his work in organising the Our of Piece of Ground Farmers' market was to bring consumers closer to food producers. This reconnection was his solution to the problem of increasing distance between food producer and consumer resulting from the contemporary food system in China.

## **Conclusion**

The experience of Old Yu in losing the venue of Big Horizon Plaza and then some of the farmers reveals the seeming dilemma that farmers such as the Wang Sisters face between working with activists such as Old Yu or commercial collaborators such as Karen. This dilemma shows that the farmers are not powerless actors forced to choose between available collaborators, as they could sometimes bypass existing collaborators and find their own opportunities if they felt it was more lucrative and more worthy of their time. They may choose to spend time on the farm and not send anyone out with produce, as they are busy talking to a business partner, who may even want the farmers to adhere to certain commercial imperatives, than spend a day at the farmers' market organised by Old Yu who made no such demands on the farmers.

Despite having sharing common distaste for conventional modernity in China, farmers did not necessarily form a bond of loyalty to activists such as Old Yu, who organised the farmers' markets. As we have seen this is due to a number of reasons including the economic potential of the farmers' market location and the viability of going to the market. The opening of their own farmers' market by Karen and Big Horizon Plaza was demonstrative of the farmers' greater inclination towards working with pragmatic collaborators who adhere to the conventional modernity that they have left behind for lives in farming. The farmers found the prospect of having access to Big Horizon Plaza to be appealing and were all seeking to go back to the site. This was evident by Big Sister Wang decision to attend Big Horizon plaza and send a surrogate to Altitude Art Centre that week.

The collaboration between Old Yu and Big Horizon Plaza would seem to work on paper with the two parties bringing different strengths. Old Yu had experience bringing farmers together for farmers' markets, while Big Horizon Plaza was a location that gave the farmers' access to affluent young families who were able to spend money on ecological produce. However, in retrospect it seemed obvious that the partnership between Old Yu and Karen, who was acting as proxy for Big Horizon Plaza, was doomed from the start given their different visions for modernity. As we saw in Chapter Seven business collaborators such as Karen and Andrew were attracted to the profitability of the farmers' produce and also to the possibility of the farmers' market as a way to use the central thorough fare in Big Horizon Plaza to draw more potential consumers to the plaza. Where Old Yu deviates from commercial collaborators in the farmers' market is that his vision for modernity is more altruistic and concerned about the environment in the whole of China as his background as an environmental activist. This difference in goals is also reflected in his lack of concern for details that commercial collaborators feel are mandatory to the success of the farmers' markets. Yet, while it lasted the relationship between Old Yu and Big Horizon Plaza, was an arrangement that the farmers were happy with, as it allowed them to build a base of customers for their produce. However, as I have shown the change in venues led to a fissure among the farmers with some deserting Old Yu's market and leaving him feeling abandoned and full of doubt about his purpose.

The farmers' actions in this chapter illustrate that the farmers are neither beholden to an overarching ideology regarding their role in the food system nor were they completely beholden to commerce as we saw in the last chapter. The line between commerce and ideology is the underlying factor that influences the farmers'

dilemma as to who they should collaborate with and how. This line is most evident in the struggles and challenges that Old Yu faced in the course of this research. While the ecological farmers' exemplified a criticism of Yan's (2012) idea of China becoming a modern transactional society built on institutional trust, they were also keen to work with collaborators such as Karen and Andrew, who adhered to this idea. Old Yu's position attacking the selfishness that has arisen since the opening up reforms is an outright resistance to the path of development suggested by Yan (2012) in his diagnosis of the problem of food safety in the Chinese Food system. Thus, his beliefs align with the farmers' aspirations for an alternative social world that is neither purely economically driven nor driven by obligation. However, while farmers may agree with Old Yu's critical stance on conventional modernity in the food system and support his efforts in reconnecting consumers to producers, they could also be economically calculating when it came to marketing their produce.

## Chapter Nine

### Conclusion

Growing, promoting and selling ecological produce seems to be a straightforward proposition in a city such as Shanghai where consumers are alienated from the producers of their food. The stream of food safety scares and false certification scandals leading to decreasing public trust in institutions of food safety has shown that there is a demand for ecological produce. In this thesis, I have shown that in the case of China, food safety is not just based on institutional systems. The progress toward institutional systems is not inevitable. As we have seen, some people may find comfort in such systems while others are sceptical given the scandals over certification regimes such as organic certification in China. In the face of these problems in the conventional food system, ecological farmers can step in and fill the breach with the help of promotional and distribution channels such as farmers' markets. However, the complexity of interactions and social relations between the farmers and their collaborators demonstrates that the reality is not that simple.

Growing ecological food does not necessitate the formation of a movement or network, as the farmers are not completely reliant on relationships with collaborators to promote, sell and market their produce. I have shown that the relationships between different collaborators, namely the farmers, activists and business people involved in the marketing of ecological produce, are filled with tensions arising from their different expectations. Yet they are also brought together by the common goal of selling and promoting the farmers' produce, albeit with different motives. Activists such as Old Yu were altruistic wishing to affect changes such as reducing environmental pollution, while collaborators such as Karen and Andrew were



seeking revenue for Big Horizon Plaza. They saw the farmers' produce as a product that could draw people to Big Horizon Plaza, who might end up spending money in the retail spaces as well as buying the farmers' produce. The motives of the ecological farmers were not as clear cut. They were caught between leaving the world of conventional modernity which was familiar to them before they returned to the land to farm and allowing themselves to be drawn back to this same world. The farmers were drawn back to the world of conventional modernity, as they could attract potential customers at good farmers' market sites such as Big Horizon Plaza or through collaboration with business partners who had contacts, who were willing to spend money on ecological produce.

Farmers' markets were organised by people who were not only motivated by either community building or profit, but often a combination of the two. Activists such as Old Yu wished to build a community of interest around the farmers' produce, while commercial partners such as Karen and Andrew were looking for a profitable event to hold in their public spaces. The farmers wanted to achieve both goals. Hence, the farmers were always seeking the most economically optimal arrangement for the marketing of their produce, which may or may not involve collaboration with activists such as Old Yu or executives such as Karen. The farmers were attracted to farmers' market sites that had the most passing foot traffic with the intention to buy produce to cook. They also sought to maximise their time in urban Shanghai by making deliveries and contacting customers to pick up produce boxes at the market. In the eyes of the farmers these rationales held more weight than the ethics of the organiser.

As I discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight, working with different collaborators comes with different expectations. Commercial collaborators such as

Karen and Andrew had expectations about the aesthetics of the farmers' produce display. Commercial collaborators expected the farmers to present themselves in ways that appeal to the lifestyles and fit into the consumption patterns of affluent consumers. Old Yu did not have such expectations, but working with Old Yu brought with it the potential of less lucrative farmers' market sites such as Altitude Art Centre. The collaboration between Old Yu and Karen gave rise to Our Piece of Ground and the development of a lucrative farmers' market at Big Horizon Plaza, but their different motives led to the acrimonious end to their collaboration.

The farmers straddled the line between the different visions of modernity held by commercial collaborators who were very much vested in conventional modernity, and the alternative vision of modernity held by activists such as Old Yu. Commercial collaborators such as Boss Wu, Andrew and Karen profited from satisfying the desires of affluent consumers in China catering to their desires. While the farmers realised the lucrative nature of this market, they were also critical of this consumption driven lifestyle. However, the farmers were not completely committed to working with more altruistic, less commercially driven collaborators who held the similar opinions, such as Old Yu. Thus, sometimes the farmers were willing to cooperate with altruistic activists such as Old Yu, but at other times they would put economic considerations first.

Producers not only get judged by consumers and potential customers, they also judge potential customers, both negatively and positively. The farmers felt that it was important that they be appreciated for the effort they put into growing their produce. In other words, appreciation for the quality of the produce without haggling or asking for discounts, demonstrating a rapport that goes beyond economic gain was an important attribute that the farmers looked for in their customers. The farmers

were seeking to build a social world that re embeds economic relations socially by sharing a relationship of genuine care with their loyal customers. The customers should care enough about the farmers to be willing to pay the higher price for their produce, and in return, the farmers would grow the best produce that they could for their customers.

In summary, the ecological farmers' aspirations to build an alternative social world shows that there are producers who are trying to reconnect with consumers at an interpersonal level. This is exemplified by their aspirations to build alternative social worlds with customers who appreciate the efforts that the ecological farmers make in growing their produce without the use of synthetic inputs. However, as I have shown the farmers are not a social movement and they are not necessarily completely committed to working with collaborators even when they share a common ethos.

### **Friction and Collaboration**

For the first few months at the start of my fieldwork the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' Market was running as smoothly as could have been hoped. The ability of Andrew, Karen and Old Yu to collaborate and work through their differences despite their different motives, brought about the farmers' market at Big Horizon Plaza which proved to be lucrative for the farmers, giving them a location to sell to many regular as well as one off customers. The plaza management was happy to give the market the space in the main thoroughfare with great foot traffic. Old Yu, who had gathered the farmers together, was present every morning to help the farmers to set up their stalls, and the market was busy every week with thousands of consumers buying the farmers' produce. Karen had even organised for some friends of hers to

occasionally volunteer at the farmers' market. Just prior to the split between Our Piece of Ground and Big Horizon Plaza, the farmers were gaining traction in the affluent neighbourhood surrounding Big Horizon Plaza and were attracting regular customers, some of whom ordered produce boxes from them. However, cracks started to show in the collaboration, starting with the weekly post market meetings in the Big Horizon Plaza conference room. Within a matter of weeks in late December the Big Horizon Plaza site was lost to Our Piece of Ground, as the collaboration between Old Yu and the Plaza fell apart. The collaboration fell apart due to the different emphases of the different collaborators on aesthetic presentation, an important symbol of modernity and the desires of the middle-class customers at the Plaza, whom the farmers targeted as customers.

Returning to Tsing's (2005) ideas of friction and collaboration, in this thesis I have shown that alternative food producers such as the ecological farmers worked with different parties with different motivations and visions for promoting and selling their produce. Sometimes these parties might even work with each other, adding another layer of tension. While activists such as Old Yu saw the altruistic potential of the farmers' endeavours, executives such as Andrew and Karen and business people such as Boss Wu saw the profits that could be made by satisfying the middle-class demand for safe food with ecological produce. Old Yu regarded the farmers as individual small producers in need of help, while Andrew regarded them as fungible suppliers of commodity desired by the middle-class consumers that his employer Big Horizon Plaza were targeting. As I showed in Chapter Seven, Andrew felt the farmers' presence at the Plaza was not even necessary.

However, if the collaborators were willing to work across differences a mutually beneficial arrangement could be found as all these parties shared the

common goal of promoting ecological produce. While their perspectives were different all of the collaborators at the farmers' market realised the distinct qualities of the farmers' produce that marked it as an attractive alternative to conventional food. The fracturing of the working relationship between them showed that the march of conventional, industrial modernity that emanated from Europe was not inevitable. This was exemplified by the unwillingness of farmers such as Sister Wang to change her displays to conform to the aesthetic that collaborators such as Karen and Andrew were trying to create in their effort to sell to middle-class consumers. Activists such as Old Yu felt that such aesthetics were superfluous compared to the importance of fixing the underlying problems with the food system in China resulting from the disconnection between consumers and the source of their food. The commercial instincts of Andrew and Karen combined with Old Yu's passion for changing the food system and environmental protection brought the farmers to the lucrative market of Big Horizon Plaza and the plaza's surrounding neighbourhood. It was also this difference in goals that eventually led to the fracturing of their relationship. These differences arose from different views of modernity.

### **Multiple Collaborators, Multiple Modernities**

I have shown that the ecological farmers straddled multiple modernities as they had abandoned trappings of conventional modernity in their personal lives, as former middle-class white collar professionals who had chosen to return to the land while also having to become part of the world that they left behind in order to sell their produce. Scholars such as Yunxiang Yan (2009; 2010) and Lisa Rofel (1999; 2007) have presented conventional modernity emanating from enlightenment Western

Europe as an unstoppable force in China. This is evident in Shanghai, which has long been regarded by many, in particular by its residents as the vanguard of modernity in China. However, as I have shown in Chapter Four, Shanghai is also a place where problems with conventional modernity manifest themselves most clearly. Indeed, not all people are satisfied with conventional modernity, in particular the problems that modernity has caused in the food system with food safety scandals that render symbols such as organic certification to be meaningless in the eyes of many consumers. In reaction to these scandals, the farmers' motivation for farming and their ideas regarding good farming technique are by their nature oppositional to conventional modernity in the food system.

The experiences of the ecological farmers and their collaborators show that the triumph of conventional modernity in China, specifically with regard to the food safety, is far from inevitable. On one hand, the preference of the farmers for economically effective collaborators such as Karen and Andrew over collaborators driven by ideology such as Old Yu can be interpreted as the farmers conforming to conventional modernity. However, the decision of farmers such as Sister Wang to abandon the trappings of conventional modernity to return to the land is similar to the counter-cultural organic farmers in the USA during the 1960s (Belasco, 2007). Indeed, as Eisenstadt (2000) points out there can be different visions of modernity that differ from conventional ideas of modernity such as alternative visions of modernity motivated by ecology. The use of farming techniques such as ducks in their rice fields that can be traced back to imperial China showed that the farmers were also questioning conventional modernity on their farms. The refusal of farmers such as Sister Wang to use antibiotics on their livestock was also not modern and led to friction with farm labourers who believed that such methods were detrimental to

the wellbeing of the farm, and that the ecological farmers were taking too much of a risk on the lives of their livestock. These were practices that were considered backward even by peasants and farm labourers.

The farmers straddle multiple modernities having left behind lives in the city as white collar, middle-class professionals or business people, while also targeting affluent urbanites as their customers. Many of the farmers such as Sister Wang, Old Zhao and Little Su had either left behind identities as white collar office workers or entrepreneurs in the city to take up farming. Yet their customers were people from this very social class, as were the collaborators they often worked with to reach these customers. Unlike the farmers, many of their customers did not want to change their lifestyles and abandon the trappings of conventional modernity. However, the farmers did not aspire to this western inspired modernity in the same way that many affluent, middle-class consumers in China do (Appardurai, 1996). The life stories of farmers such as Sister Wang exemplify this. She and farmers like her have experienced the trappings of conventional modernity and have chosen to leave these luxuries behind, as they have reprioritised their lives to become farmers in order to better take care of themselves and their families by growing their own food. Having experience the trappings of modernity they have also identified problems in the same vein as activists such as Old Yu with the food system.

As I showed in Chapter Seven, the need to appeal to customers in a way that complements the lifestyles that they have left behind could be difficult for the farmers. This was most apparent in their working relationship with collaborators such as Andrew and Karen, who expected to see an aesthetic that would convey conventional modernity in the way that farmers presented themselves. They expected the farmers to have an aesthetic at the farmers' market that was rustic, but also

refined enough to distinguish the farmers' market from wet markets which they considered to be socially inferior shopping spaces. Andrew drew much of his inspiration and ideas for standards from conventional retailers in shopping centres. As far as he was concerned the minimum benchmark for the farmers' displays at the market was to be as neat and tidy as the produce display at the Carrefour supermarket in Big Horizon Plaza. Andrew was not as concerned with the distance between producer and consumer in the conventional food supply chain. As exemplars of conventional modernity and the associated attributes of cosmopolitanism and commercialism, Andrew and Karen put more emphasis on symbols such as aesthetics that conveyed how the ecological produce was grown than interpersonal trust between producer and consumer. Activists such as Old Yu and farmers such as Sister Wang found such symbols to be inauthentic. While the actions of these collaborators was demonstrative of Yunxiang Yan's (2012) findings in his study of food safety emphasising the importance of enhancing social trust by making institutions such as contracts more robust, the position of activists such as Old Yu and the farmers demonstrate that there is a different vision of modernity that is not based on institutions of trust underwriting interactions between strangers. In contrast, Old Yu valued the connection between producer and end consumer as a solution to the problems arising from distantiation. They did not place as much importance on aesthetics and luxuries, feeling that they were superfluous, whereas Andrew and Karen valued these aesthetic as symbols that distinguished the farmers' produce from conventional produce.

The need to have a certain aesthetic and meet the expectations of middle-class consumers was based on preferences set by Andrew and Karen based on their understanding of these consumers. Failure to meet their expectations led to a



perception of being backward and lacking the necessary *suzhi* to be a modern human being in China. Despite the critiques from collaborators such as Andrew about their lack of understanding of marketing, the farmers were far from being passive recipients of demands from them. The farmers were not completely unaware of middle-class desires and taste, as they themselves were also once part of the same social milieu as Andrew and Karen. The difference was that farmers such as Sister Wang and Little Su had chosen to leave that world behind to return to the land to take up farming. There were also other farmers such as the couple who owned Mileage Free Range Poultry Farm with one foot in urban Shanghai, who often demonstrated a better understanding and willingness to adhere to Karen and Andrew's demands. The way the farmers responded to these different collaborators and the opportunities they brought with them varied. Some were able to play the game of conventional modernity better than others, and some were more willing. For example, Old Zhao was more willing to conform to aesthetic demands of Andrew and Karen by creating his own smiley face badge to appeal to people, while Sister Wang preferred to put her efforts into growing produce rather than making a sale. Her interest in growing things rather than maximising the profitability of her farm put Sister Wang at odds with collaborators such as Andrew and Karen, and also at odds with the Shanghainese business driven ethic of profit motive.

The difference between activist collaborators such as Old Yu and commercial collaborators such as Andrew and Karen lay in their different motives for organising farmers' markets. Old Yu's motive was altruistic, being based on his desire to contribute to reduce environmental pollution in China, while collaborators such as Andrew and Karen were driven by revenue and profit. These motives were evident in their choice of collaborators. While Old Yu did not want to invite Big North Farm, as

the size of their operation indicated to Old Yu that they did not need his help as much as other farmers, and also their produce did not match Old Yu's standards. In contrast, Andrew and Karen invited some sellers of imported fruit to join the farmers' market during the national day holiday in order to draw more traffic to the market.

The different ways that the farmers kept feet in both worlds of modernity, either with reluctance in the case of Sister Wang or willingly in the case of Old Zhao, showed that the farmers did not have an overriding ideology, and could choose their own paths instead of following the path set by an ideological leader. Nor were the farmers unconditionally supportive of Old Yu's vision of modernity that was not profit-driven, emphasising the need to reduce pollution. This was evidenced by the split among the farmers' ranks when Old Yu moved Our Piece of Ground Farmers' market to a new site. The farmers' straddling of multiple modernities showed that the ecological farmers were not fundamentally opposed to conventional modernity. While many of them had personally left behind the world of conventional modernity they still sought customers who were part of that world. Furthermore, their families were also part of that world they left behind. For example, Sister Wang's husband was working as a manager in a telecommunications company, and her decision to buy Australian beef because her son liked beef.

In his research on food safety in China, Yunxiang Yan (2012, 2015) suggests that the development of China as a society of individuals that are only accountable to each other with the enforcement of institutions like contracts is inevitable. However, in this study I have shown that the farmers and activists would argue otherwise, proposing an alternative of reconnection between urban consumers and the producers of their food. While collaborators such as Andrew and Karen believed that the

relationship between producer and consumer would end after the transaction, for activists such as Old Yu and farmers the relations only began there. I have shown that the ecological farmers were neither good Samaritans helping others in need, nor were they individuals who were selfishly pursuing their own interests (Yan, 2010). The ecological farmers do not fit into these two extremes of individualistic and altruistic actors in the model of social development that Yunxiang Yan (2009) proposes. Instead, the farmers aspired to have close social relations with their customers built on mutual respect that had at its heart, a mutual appreciation for one another's efforts.

### **Building an Alternative Social World**

The moral project that the farmers were engaged in through their produce was to build an alternative social world based on mutual appreciation between themselves and their customers rather than the reciprocity of mutual obligation or the instrumentality of exchange relations. The farmers aspired to share a relationship based on their appreciation of the effort that customers made to purchase ecological produce and the customers' appreciation of the effort it takes to grow ecological produce. The bond between producer and customer was based on a common interest in the qualities of ecological food, namely the way the food was grown without synthetic herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers, and the resulting flavour of the food. As Jukka Gronow (2004) points out peoples' perspectives on the qualities of food are based on their social world.

The ecological farmers and activist collaborators such as Old Yu aspired to bridge the alienation of food producers from end consumers that has led to the decline in accountability among producers toward end consumers. As I showed in

Chapter Five this is easier said than done. The farmers were seeking a closer connection with their customers by building a social world based on the common appreciation of the qualities of ecological produce. Instead of building up more robust institutions to promote social trust as Yuxiang Yan (2012) suggests in his work on food safety and social trust in China, the farmers were responding to the declining trust in China's food system by building closer interpersonal connections between food producers like themselves and consumers.

In their efforts to initiate relations with potential customers in the market place the farmers were confronted with sceptical and sometimes wary consumers. Some people would assume that the farmers' claims were false and did not even try to engage with the farmers when walking past the farmers' market while others found it hard to believe that the farmers could grow their produce the way they claimed to have done. The farmers' goal was to convert the sceptics and charm the wary. The evocation of friendship did not guaranteed success. Even invitations to try free samples with no strings attached were often rejected by passers-by for fear of being dragged into a reciprocal relationship with the farmers. Such obligations also worked in the other direction. Sister Wang already had loyal customers from her husband's workplace, but their relationship was built on mutual obligation instead of mutual respect and appreciation. In exchange for their repeat custom Sister Wang would offer her husband's colleagues a generous discount, one that she would complain about, labelling such customers as bargain hunters. The relationship between such bargain hunting consumers and the ecological farmers was more akin to the traditional *guanxi* networks of instrumental social relations built on mutual obligation rather than the alternative social world that the farmers aspired to build based on mutual respect and appreciation.

While farmers were being judged by passers-by at the markets, they were also selective of whom to include in their alternative social world of mutual appreciation for their produce. Farmers such as Sister Wang felt a sense of moral distinction over people who had the means but chose not to spend money on ecological food. Having once lived middle-class lives themselves the farmers were more than willing to pass judgement on people who would not buy their produce, especially if the farmers felt that they had the financial means. Affluent people who chose not to spend money on the farmers' produce were branded by farmers as being too lazy to cook and therefore neglecting the wellbeing of their families. The farmers looked for people who were appreciative of their efforts to the extent that the higher prices of their produce would not be an issue. It was a not a world built on transactions or mutual obligations, but rather on mutual respect whereby the farmers respected the customers for making the choice to spend money on their produce rather than the myriad of other luxuries available to them in Shanghai. Although customers who were willing to pay the higher prices for ecological produce would sometimes get a discount from the farmers, the farmers did not want to feel obligated to grant a discount. Thus, the free sample was indeed a sample that was free from obligation, as the aim was for passers-by at the markets to taste the difference and gain an appreciation for the efforts of the farmers that would engender a willingness to pay the higher prices for the ecological produce. These were the people that the farmers held in the highest esteem, not just long-time customers, but appreciative customers. Customers who appreciated their efforts and did not seek discounts or other benefits from the relationship earned the farmers' respect and were judged by the farmers to be superior to those who did. The appreciative customers and the farmers formed a community of interest, where the friendship between the two parties was not based

on etiquette, but rather mutual regard undergirded by a shared passion for ecological produce.

The idea that alternative food producers such as the ecological farmers are very open and welcoming of people as long as consumers buy their produce is not accurate. The farmers were not just indiscriminately building communities, but actually selective of who they would include. The price of their produce, as is the case in farmers' markets outside of China, was higher than conventional produce and therefore made the markets a space for the privileged. However, being privileged was not the only criteria when it came to inclusion or exclusion in the social world of the ecological farmers. Even privileged people in Shanghai could be judged negatively by the farmers for having the means, but choosing not to buy their produce or for buying from them only because there was a discount. Inclusion in the community of interest is not only based on social privilege such as higher social status and class, but other less tangible qualities. Being appreciative of the effort that farmers put into the growing of ecological produce was one of those qualities, as it demonstrated the consumers' effort beyond mere willingness to spend on produce from the farmers.

The social world that the farmers were seeking to build was an alternative to traditional, conventional Chinese social relations based on mutual obligation, as the farmers felt that such performances were not genuine, as opposed to their aspirations to share genuine relationships with customers based on mutual appreciation for each other's efforts. The farmers felt that a strong bond with consumers should not be based on contracts or symbols proving the farmers' claims. Instead the farmers believed that their bond with consumers should be built on mutual appreciation. The farmers aspired to go one step further beyond mutual obligation to mutual respect

based on mutual appreciation of each other's actions. The farmers appreciated the efforts of customers, who were willing to spend money on more expensive produce, while customers appreciate the farmers' efforts and did not try to get a bargain.

### **Individual Actors or Collaborators: The Ideological Position of Ecological Farmers**

The answer to the question of whether the ecological farmers were individuals or collaborators was evident in their collaborations with Old Yu and with each other. As I showed in Chapter Three, the farmers were more individual actors than a united movement. The different practices of the different farmers from the farm to the market were indicative of their different individual ethos. Some farms such as Pearl Bay Farm grew produce in high volumes, while others such as the Wang sisters and Old Zhao had less yield on their farms. Sister Wang grew her tomatoes in a greenhouse, while Old Zhao did not. Even though their farming practices were different, the farmers shared a common goal of operating outside of the problematic conventional food system of China.

The farmers were not unconditionally loyal to particular collaborators. They acted as individuals choosing their own direction and future when they were presented with different collaborative options with different challenges and benefits. They could choose to work with commercial, profit driven collaborators such as Andrew and Karen who gave them access to good locations to sell their produce, where they could attract customers who were willing to spend money on ecological produce and possibly even prioritise that expenditure over spending money in other areas. However, the challenge of such collaborative opportunities lay in the maintaining of aesthetic standards. In contrast to collaborating with commercial

collaborators, working with an activist such as Old Yu would give the farmers freedom to display produce the way they wanted, but at the same time there was uncertainty regarding access to potential customers due to Old Yu's choice of sites. The farmers' enthusiasm to be part of the farmers' market that Karen and Andrew were running after the departure of Our Piece of Ground from Big Horizon Plaza showed that commerce was a key consideration in collaboration. As did their willingness to skip the farmers' markets if there were more important opportunities such as entertaining potential investors or customers making a farm visit also reflected the same mentality. Although both Sister Wang and Old Zhao were loyal to Old Yu in the aftermath of the split with Karen and the change in site of the farmers' market, they could not be counted on to be at the market every week. Their attendance at the market would depend on whether they had farm visitors or perhaps other opportunities such as meeting potential investors during a public holiday such as Remembrance Day. Hence, they could neither be considered completely loyal to Old Yu nor completely compliant with the demands of collaborators such as Karen and Boss Wu. While both farmers admired Old Yu, and found Karen and Andrew's demands to be bothersome, it was also necessary for their farms to be economically viable. Thus, entertaining a potential investor or potential long term customer would have a greater likelihood of profit than spending four hours at a farmers' market with few customers. This shows that the farmers were not tethered to social institutions such as bonds of loyalty or unconditional commitment to a common interest (Yan, 2009).

The farmers acted on their individual desires (Rofel, 2007), albeit different to those of most middle-class consumers in China. This was evident in their ability to organise their own farmers' markets such as the market at Crystal Bay Mansions.



With the possibility of the right profit to be made the farmers were willing to organise themselves and bypass external collaborators. However, even this was fraught with tension, as there was friction between the farmers themselves when they competed for customers at markets. For example, Old Zhao and Sister Wang both extolled the virtues of farming as being good for their health, yet they competed directly at the market, even criticising each other's farming practices in front of potential customers.

The ecological farmers' lack of formal cooperation shows that they did not constitute an alternative food network. Furthermore, the farmers did not constitute an alternative food movement, as they were not proactively seeking social change. Unlike organisations such as the La Verde cooperative in Andalusia, Spain that is working for farmer rights and has a strong anti-capitalist bent, the farmers did not aspire to such broad social change (Leitchford, 2014). The farmers were trying to connect with potential customers who would appreciate their efforts in growing produce rather than actively educating consumers about the need to abandon consumerism and spend more money on ecological produce instead of other goods such as designer handbags. As I showed in Chapter Eight it was activists such as Old Yu who were trying to institute social change and were therefore most strident in their critique of conventional modernity. The farmers' non-committal working relationship with Old Yu and their desire to return to Big Horizon Plaza showed that they were not as idealistic as Old Yu.

The farmers' aspirations show that they were attracted by the economic benefits of conventional modernity, while also sharing a belief in an ecological vision of modernity with Old Yu, about the importance of reconnecting food producer and end consumer. Nevertheless, the farmers' straddling of multiple

modernities shows that they were not as critical of conventional modernity and the rise of self-expression and individualism as Old Yu. The farmers were more than willing to break with any notion of community such as leaving the Our Piece of Ground circle when it ceased to be of economic benefit. The farmers were acting on their individual desires, either with regard to food safety or broader altruistic concerns such as environmental protection. While they might have abandoned much of the material trappings of conventional modernity to pursue ecological farming, they were nonetheless required to participate in conventional modernisation in spaces such as Big Horizon Plaza. However, their motives were clearly a critique on conventional modernity and its consequences. Their aspirations to build alternative social worlds was indicative of the critique that they were making of the impersonal, economically based social worlds that were part and parcel of conventional modernity. The farmers' navigation of different visions of modernity and their aspirations to build an alternative social world show that growing and then selling ecological produce is an ongoing challenge of negotiation between the often contradicting beliefs about Chinese society and China's path of modernity.

### **Broader Implications, Limitations and Future Research**

In this thesis I have shed light on the dynamic social relations between different collaborators involved in the marketing of ecological produce. I have focused on the farmers' perspective and their interactions with commercial and activist collaborators, and also what they say about each other. By focussing on the farmers' perspective I have elucidated the tension between alternative and conventional modernity in the project of selling alternative food, in this case ecological produce. The farmer focused perspective that I have adopted for this study has its limitations, as the

perspective of other actors such as the commercial collaborators and consumers also warrant study. This shortcoming can be addressed in future research focussing on these different actors.

I suggest that my findings have broader implications for the field of alternative foodways, and more specifically the study of farmers' markets. The complex relations between different collaborators that work on farmers markets are fraught with tensions. These tensions arise from the different collaborators' views on modernity reflected in how they feel ecological produce should be sold. In so doing I have elucidated the tensions of alternative food producers as to how far they go alternative and how far they stay conventional. The tensions between the different collaborators reveal the tension between alterity and conventionality in farmers' markets in China. While commercial collaborators such as Karen and Andrew adhere to conventional modernity, activists such as Old Yu aspire to a more ecologically driven alternative. The farmers straddle the line between these two positions.

The limitations of this research lie mainly in my focus on the farmers' perspective. Other collaborators' perspectives are indeed worth exploring in future research. The question of why collaborators such as Karen and Boss Wu want the farmers to conform to conventional modernity can reveal more about the tension between conventionality and alterity when it comes to alternative foods in the market. I hypothesise that there could be more than mere profit motive behind these commercial collaborators' actions. A research project with Boss Wu could reveal more about his ideas about scaling up ecological produce, the market for ecological produce and how his approach to selling ecological produce is different to that of the farmers and activists such as Old Yu. This potential project would also help to understand the scepticism of the farmers toward Boss Wu.

I did not look at consumers as much as I would have liked, as it was difficult to find a group because they came from all walks of life. However, having spent a year with Old Yu, I learned that he founded a network of consumers of ecological produce, the Shanghai Vegetable Cooperative. Research on a consumer group such as the Shanghai Vegetable cooperative would reveal the feelings of this loyal group of consumers toward the farmers, and their reasons for forming the cooperative. I would also be able to see the farmers' sales tactics such as brochures from the perspective of these loyal consumers and better understand the effectiveness of the farmers' aspirations for an alternative social world built on mutual appreciation with such consumers.

In addition, there is also potential to explore the consumption of ecological food for reasons of health, and build on the theme of care with regard to the consumption of food, which I explored in Chapter Six. Near the end of my year in the field and also on a subsequent visit with Big Sister Wang when I was in Shanghai for a workshop in April 2016, I became acquainted with some consumers of health food. Some of them aspired to start consumer movements. One such consumer was Sister Wang's husband's cousin Amanda, whom I became acquainted with near the end of fieldwork. She started organising events to encourage the consumption of ecological produce. Meeting this group has opened up possibilities of researching this group of consumers as well as to get their views on the ecological farmers and the way ecological produce is sold, revealing another perspective on consumers' appreciation for the ecological farmers and their produce.

Another potential piece of research is to take a different approach to analysing the data I collected in the field such as the free samples, brochures and flyers that the ecological farmers hand out at the market. These sales tactics the

farmers employ can be analysed in terms of their ability to create narratives that connect urban consumers to the farms. These narratives can be based on the flavour of free samples or the image of the farms that are on flyers and brochures. Analysing the engagement with the sense of taste through free samples, and stoking potential customers' imaginations of the farms with brochures and flyers will shed light on how the role of taste and imagination in marketing alternative foods such as ecological produce differs from the marketing of conventional food.

While this thesis contributes to the wider body of literature on alternative foods and alternative food networks it is also a starting point for research on the complex relations in the marketing of alternative foods. The approach that I have taken in this thesis is one of several approaches that can be taken to studying the marketing of alternative foods, whether it be focussing on different actors or changing the theoretical approach to analysing data. The possibilities for future research demonstrate that researching the selling of ecological produce can reveal much about the relationship between consumers, producers and marketers, contributing to a deeper understanding of the alternative food market.

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